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A Story Of Lonesome Soldiers And Bored Women 25c

EB64

The Battle Done

S. LEONARD RUBINSTEIN

Complete and Unabridged

LONELY FOR WOMEN

Handling men lonely for women was Sergeant Hoffman's toughest job as commander of a German POW camp. And Ben took on some rugged deals:

—The plantation owner's daughter who expected special services from POW workers!

—The girl cashier found hiding in the back room of the officers' mess!

But Ben's most urgent problem was lovely, provocative Anne whose civilian job made her an easy target for off-limits love.

"Easy to read but hard to forget . . . Explosive!"

—OMAHA WORLD-HERALD

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S. Leonard Rubinstein was born in Salem, New Jersey. He attended a school of journalism and advertising in Philadelphia before joining the Army in 1943 and, after his discharge, took his Bachelor of Letters in journalism at Rutgers University. In 1951 he earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing at the State University of Iowa.

Mr. Rubinstein now lives in State College, Pennsylvania, and teaches at Pennsylvania State University. He has had short stories and translations in Accent, The Western Review, and the anthology New Directions 14.

FROM THE REVIEWS

"We have had any number of excellent novels about American troops in action in World War II but this, so far as I know, is the first we have had that deals with men of war in prison camps when battle is done. It, too, qualifies for the accolade 'excellent.' . . . What emerges is a rich and interesting portrait . . . There is a good natured flavor about this novel, for it has a leavening of humor and sharp insight into the minds of men."

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"The story moves rapidly with soldier-humor, and under the badinage a solid decency gives it value as well as entertainment interest. A good story."

—MALIBU TIMES & TOPANGA NEWS

"Within the limits he has set for himself in this study of a German prisoner-of-war camp in South Carolina, Leonard Rubinstein has written a very good novel indeed . . . Mr. Rubinstein writes sparely and cleanly. His dialogue is suggestive rather than explicit, and there is not a synthetic situation or a hollow character in the book."

—NEW YORK TIMES

"Life in a prison camp with its complex relationships is vividly portrayed by the novelist. Mr. Rubinstein writes exceedingly well and has created a memorable group of characters. A distinguished first novel. Recommended."

—LIBRARY JOURNAL

A NOVEL

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S. LEONARD RUBINSTEIN

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I thank my wife, Mary Cady Rubinstein, who prizes honesty above cleverness, and Frances Phillips, of William Morrow & Company, whose help was invaluable.

To Morris and Bessie Rubinstein

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CHAPTER ONE

JOSEF was reflected in the mirror, standing at the end of the row of gleaming porcelain bowls, watching Ben comb his hair. The sweat on Josef's undershirt soaked the stenciled PW on the chest into a dark blotch.

"Na, Josef," Ben said in German. "You have made the latrine spotlessly clean."

"Danke," Josef said. In the mirror his lips compressed against laughter. Ben drew the comb swiftly through his hair, flipping water drops through the air. Josef ducked, and burst out, "A disgrace. Those broken teeth!"

Ben ran his fingernail down the teeth of the comb.

"Such a comb," Josef said. "It is a shame for you to use such a comb! The American sergeant in charge of German prisoners! Our leader!"

Ben laughed and tossed Josef the towel. "Put my things in my locker, won't you?"

"Sicher, honored Herr Hoffman!"

The wooden planks of the walk sank springily into the wet turf under Ben's weight. The morning was wet and heavy with the South Carolina mist, rising from the Charleston salt-water marshes. He turned right at the crosswalk by the barracks and went into the orderly room.

"Ben," the company clerk said, "your promotion came in the mail this morning. You're jumped from buck to master. Congratulations, Sergeant!"

"Thank you," Ben said. "Honest?"

"Honest."

"Money," Ben said. "How I love it."

He opened the door of the captain's office, passed the desk, and went through the rear door into the mess hall. At the counter separating the mess hall from the kitchen, he paused. He lifted the wooden bar, moved through the narrow space into the steamy oven-heated room.

A prisoner of war, starch-clean in a stenciled white jacket and a white apron, shouted, *"Achtung!"* Two men ran to join him, formed a straight line, and stood stiffly.

"You boys making fun of me?" Ben said. "Make no jokes, *Lumpen! Was haben wir* for breakfast?"

The prisoners laughed and broke from formation.

Broad-faced, middle-aged Hans said, "Herr Hoffman, ve haf made somesing *besonders* for you. Today, *Ich, selber,* haf for you made—crêpes Suzette!"

Ben took the cover off the warming pot. Steam leaped in a cloud about his head. He made a slight bow, clicking his heels.

"Lieber Hans, wie kann ich dir danken? I am overwhelmed with gratitude. And, now, *zum Tisch!"*

Hans pulled his eyebrows together. "Grot-ee-tood?"

"Gratitude. *Dankbarkeit.* Remember it, Hans."

"Sure sing!"

Oriental music poured golden minors from the radio on the shelf above the racked pans. Ben reached up to touch the warm brown bakelite of the radio casing and, astonished, turned to stare at the prisoners.

"You like this music?" he said.

"Oh, yes, Herr Hoffman," the wizened dark-faced baker, Otto, said. "It is strange, but it is beautiful. We listen to it all the morning."

Ben shrugged and walked to a table in the dining hall, melodic chords flowing after him. Otto turned up the volume.

A mellow voice intruded, swelling as the music softened. "Today, in observance of Passover, these religious services are brought to you from Temple Beth Israel in New York. Passover commemorates the deliverance of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. The Angel of Death visited . . ."

"Bring me a cup of black coffee, please," Ben called.

Passover, he thought, and I've forgotten it. April sixteenth. At home they're in a madhouse of preparation, bringing out the new pots and pans and dishes, and cooking and baking and roasting for the feast nights. And tonight the doors will be open for the spirit of Elijah to enter the house and drink the dark wine, poured and waiting. The *Closed for Holiday* sign is in the window of our grocery on the small side street of our quiet Quaker town in South Jersey. Back in the house, Dad is seated at the head of the table, saying the prayers, and if my brother could get home from the Naval Training

Center, he is saying them, too. My baby sister is trying to keep from giggling and ruining her twelve-year-old dignity. Mom is wondering if she forgot to put anything under the ritual napkin—the hard-boiled egg, the fresh horse-radish, the matzoth. And I'm reminded by German prisoners, Nazis, listening to holy music from a synagogue. Instead of matzoth I eat—crêpes Suzette.

Hans made them light and delicate. A former chef in a Bavarian hotel, Hans was skilled in his art. Ben shouted for the American company clerk, cutting a large square of a pancake with the side of a fork for him to taste. The corporal closed his mouth on the food and widened his eyes. "It disappears," he said. "Nothing to it." Ben told him to ring up the prisoners' compound and tell them to call the formation for head count. Ben finished his coffee and went into his office, a desk screened into a corner of the mess hall.

On his desk was a pile of scattered letters and postcards, mail forwarded from the base camp for the prisoners. He took a musette bag from the chair and crammed the blue-stamped messages into it. Slinging the bag over his shoulders, he went into the orderly room.

"Befehl will be waiting for you at the compound gate," the clerk said.

A whistle screamed and shouts broke out. Ben looked through the dusty window across the road at the wire enclosure. Prisoners were bolting from the hutment rows and running into the clearing before the recreation hall. The fat German camp sergeant was standing in the clearing, his cheeks red and puffed around the metal sliver in his mouth, noise slicing keen and shrill into the air.

"Still stand!" The sergeant's voice was a whisper through the glass. The mass of men were now shocked into a silent block. Ben hunched the strap up on his shoulder and stepped down from the orderly room onto the planked walk. The guard met him at the gate shack and walked across the road with him. Ben waited for the padlock to be unsnapped, the chain unwound, the gate swung open, and then stepped through into the compound.

The German sergeant came in a thudding run toward Ben and halted, breathless, before him. "Herr Hoffman," he said, glowing, *"darf ich Ihnen gratulieren!* You are now a master sergeant!"

Ben stood still. "How in the hell did you know already?"

A wink. "Gestapo!"

"Come on," Ben said. "Gestapo. Let's go count heads." The full-fleshed German marched portly beside him. Ben stopped again.

"Thanks anyhow, Befehl."

"Nothing which to thank," Befehl said.

Men shuffled and murmured in the formation, watching Ben and the camp leader walk into position before them. "Put them at ease, Befehl."

"Rührt euch!"

"I have a hundred and forty-five men counted out on Kommandos. That's twenty-two work details. Five men under confinement. One man confined to camp. Ninety-nine men in formation, including you. Does that check with your figures?"

"Bestimmt, Herr Hoffman."

The company leader called the men to attention and Ben marched a tangent across the field until he stood beside the company front. He strode down the rank of prisoners, Befehl following dutifully two paces behind. Each stride brought Ben before one man. At the end of the line Ben turned sharply right, and right again, and marched before the second rank.

"Ninety-nine men," he said. *"Genau."*

"Gut!" Befehl glowed.

They stood before the formation.

"Still stand!" Ben shouted.

The company snapped rigid.

"Befehl, tell them to march to the gate. Orders are that every man must be inoculated. Guards will conduct them to the hospital. You will go with the second group this afternoon."

The cords in Befehl's neck jumped with each shouted word.

"Just the company," Ben said. "You don't have to tell the whole state of Carolina."

The red-faced German stopped. *"Was, bitte?"*

"Go ahead," Ben said. "Finish up."

Befehl bellowed, *"Kompanie, links—"*

"Wait a minute," Ben said, "I forgot." He shook the musette bag from his shoulder. "Give them their mail before they go. Something to read while they wait."

Smiles cropped out in ranks. The camp leader called out

names and each man broke ranks, took his mail, and walked swiftly back to formation.

Befehl handed out the last letter and the company front was again whole. A hand shot up from the mass.

"What do you want, König?" Befehl shouted.

"Herr Hoffman." The soldier stepped forward. "Does no mail come from Oldenburg? The war is over many months now and I have still heard nothing from my family."

"Du, König?" Ben smiled. *"Mein Freund,* have you no memory? I gave every man a card to fill out. A search card to send to your relatives. The card read: 'A member of the beaten army seeks his next of kin.' You tore the card up. You said the *Wehrmacht* was *not* a beaten army. Your folks do not know where you are. Clear."

"May I have a card now?"

"Certainly," Ben said. "But it is still the same card."

"Thank you." The German stepped backward into ranks.

The prisoner company clerk marched the men to the gate. Two guards were waiting. The gate turned wide from the wire fence and the prisoners stamped out into the road. The guards, carbines strapped to their shoulders, fell in beside them and the mass moved machine-like up the road, slow and inexorable, heels striking the paving in deliberate German cadence.

Befehl and Ben walked across the clearing, moist soil yielding under their shoes, toward the German orderly room. The camp carpenter, the German told Ben, had finished the captain's cedar chest. Stolen wood. A forest Kommando gathered felled logs for the Beaumont Lumber Company and brought large timbers back on the army truck with them. "The captain will be pleased," Ben said. "Have *der Tischler* put it in the captain's jeep later."

"Herr Hoffman." Befehl put his hand on Ben's arm, arresting him on the first wooden step leading into the long barracks building. "I have the man in the office now whom you ordered confined. Do you want to see him now?"

Stepping down onto the wet ground, feeling his shoes sink and the spongy soil creeping over the edges, Ben stood and looked at the German. Befehl flushed.

"You have him in your *office?"* Ben said.

"Ja." Befehl stared up at the door of the gray building.

"All right," Ben said. "I'll see him."

The camp leader leaped up the steps and opened the door,

crowding the flesh of his body against the jamb, allowing Ben to pass.

A tall slender man in faded light khakis sprang to his feet. The letters were stark and black on the white-scrubbed shirt. He passed a hand nervously over his black, waved hair and smiled.

"Sit down," Ben said and seated himself at the desk. The prisoner sat erectly on the straight-backed chair, folding thin bluish hands in his lap.

The camp leader put a paper in Ben's hands. In a slow voice, pronouncing the German words with careful diction, Ben read aloud: "The undersigned swear that on many occasions they have seen prisoner Karl Brüste in the act of powdering and rouging his face. *(Beim pudern und schminken,* the German words, Ben thought, *sounded* queasy.) He has made proposals to each of us. Signed . . ."

"Ein warmer Bruder," Befehl said. "Without doubt."

"A warm brother," Ben repeated. "Brüste, have you anything to say?"

The thin man made a pursed mouth at Befehl and rose, in a single swaying motion, to his feet and walked to the desk.

"Herr Hoffman—" He put his hands on the desk and leaned forward—"you will understand. We are different from the others." Earnestly: *"Du und ich.* We are intellectuals."

"DU?" Ben said.

"Pardon." Brüste raised a placating hand. *"Sie.* But you understand. It is a matter of appreciation. A matter of art."

Befehl turned to the window coughing, his shoulders shaking.

"We intellectuals understand—"

"You're sick," Ben said.

The prisoner clicked his tongue. "Why do you take that attitude? I am a Berliner. I am thirty-four years old. I am an artist. You and I know the *Asthetik—"*

"Befehl!" Ben said. "Have Brüste pack his belongings and be at the gate at two this afternoon. I am sending him to the main camp. He will be treated there."

Brüste put his hand over his chest and stared with disgust at Ben. He stepped back and clicked his heels, his head stiff and proud.

"Pardon, Herr Hoffman. I have made a mistake. You are but a soldier."

"Go to your hut, Brüste." Ben shook his head. "I wish you luck."

The prisoner depressed his head sharply, a lock of hair rolling forward to hang over his brow. He turned quickly, his movements precise and military, and strode through the door.

Ben walked to the gate. Last time I was called an intellectual, he thought—that honey-colored blonde in Philadelphia, at college, that poet, fizzing all the time. The dawn! The rolling sea! The soft dusk falling on a famished soul! Every day, in journalism class, a poem for me. Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Yeats. Women's rights. If she liked them, I liked them. And every time we'd have privacy, a place and a time to do more than sparkle, she'd go white with fear and scream we were soulmates. We were intellectuals!

Baudelaire was enough for her, I told her; she didn't need me. I even wrote a final poem for her; I said I didn't want mental love—I wanted elemental love.

Wir Intellektuelle!

Back in his office, Ben found his clerk, Walther Urleid, seated at the desk, typing.

"*Servus,* Walther," Ben said. "Do you have the work details ready?"

"*Servus,* Ben," Walther said. "They are all typed and ready for you."

The German shuffled the papers into a neat square sheaf and slid the forms into a large yellow Manila envelope. Ben tucked it under his arm.

The door to the office opened. "Ben," the company clerk said, "the guards called from the hospital. One prisoner refuses to be needled."

"Aah," Ben said. "I've got to go inspect the work details now. Tell the guards to bring him back. Put him in confinement and send him over with the second group later. If he still acts up, we'll do something. Meanwhile, tell Befehl to talk to him."

The clerk closed the door.

"Hey!" Ben yelled.

The door opened.

"Isn't the captain coming in today?"

"Does he ever?" the clerk said.

"You still forging his name?"

"I am," the clerk said wearily.

"Walther here has some papers for you to sign later, then."

"All right." The door slammed.

Ben went through the mess hall, waving at the kitchen workers, and out the side door into the muddy area where the motor vehicles were parked. He swung a leg into the driver's seat of the jeep and sat down. The Manila envelope he weighted down with a wrench from the dash compartment.

Far left of the camp street the distant voice of a drill sergeant shouted commands. Ben drove the jeep slowly, watching squads in the field wheel and turn. "To the rear—harch!" A platoon marched suddenly away from its own footsteps. He hummed softly.

The white-helmeted M.P. at the base exit hut waved the jeep past the barrier and thumbed his nose. Ben shook his head sadly at the rearview mirror. "No *Disziplin* in this army at all."

The thick army tire treads scorched on the highway to the lumber sheds where Kommando One was working. Whistling, Ben stopped by the roadside, unscrewed the wing nuts of the windshield and lowered the glass pane flat on the hood. He scudded the jeep back onto the paving, passing passenger cars and buses on the faded concrete, white in the glare of the sun. The little low machine swung around and between the large heavy motors. On a rising grade, the jeep poked out from behind a great trailer-tractor laboring upward, hurried up the left strip of concrete, and darted back to the right strip in front of the huge cab. Ben saw in the mirror the license plate of the truck fastened to the front bumper at the height of his head. He pressed on the accelerator, and the jeep leaped ahead.

He turned off the main road into the ruts of a dirt lane. A half-mile later, he drove into a sandy clearing between two long lofting shelters. Two high wooden roofs sloped away from center ridges, held high by towering black-creosoted poles. Planks, freshly cut and fragrant, lay stacked in stalls open to the weather. The shrill scream of a rotor blade biting into a log vibrated in the air. The prisoners' puppy barked and danced around the jeep, forcing Ben to stop.

Ben climbed out. The shaggy little dog bounded to his feet, racing around and around him, leaping to Ben's knees,

shrill yipes popping. He darted away, his scrubby body stretching in speed, turned too quickly, tumbled sprawling, bobbled to his feet, shook his woolly pelt fiercely, and rushed again toward Ben, sand spurting in his wake. Ben stumbled over the little dog and bent over to pick him up. The pup gasped for breath in his arms, tongue lolling wetly from the tiny black muzzle. Ben placed him on the sandy ground and he sat there, head hanging upon his forepaws, hindquarters turned to the side, lying loose and absurd. He panted and shook, looking up at Ben in delight. Today Ben had allowed the prisoners to take him out of the compound for the first time. The puppy's mother had been a patchy mongrel that had crept into the wire enclosure to whelp her litter. Only this one had lived. The Germans called him "Mutti," a pet name for a sweetheart.

In the clearing, prisoners carried planks and pushed wheelbarrows. Lustily a voice sang, *"Über den Bergen da gibt's ein' Fabrik, und dort sind die Frauen elektrisch. . . ."* High in a loft, at the head of a shaky wooden stairway, a girl appeared with papers in her hand. Her heels clacked on the steps, and her hand clutched the railing.

From the bottom step she called, "Hello, Ben."

On the flat fender of the jeep Ben sat, waiting. Huddled against his leg, the pup was quiet.

"Oh," she said, coming across the sand. "What a darling."

She crouched down, smoothing the seat of her skirt, knees pressed together, to caress the puppy. The dog cringed against Ben.

"Ooh, he's frightened," the girl murmured, reaching to stroke him. Mutti snarled, baring his tiny needle teeth. The girl touched his ear. The puppy screamed and snapped. She jerked back, unbalanced, and tumbled. A breadth of white thigh flashed from her pulled-up skirt. She rose to her feet, her face suffused. A single drop of blood formed on the first finger of her right hand.

"Damn!" Ben said, slapping grains of sand from her dress. "Are you all right, Anne?"

A man in a stenciled short-sleeve jersey, stained and feathered with sawdust, rushed from the shadow of a shed and grabbed the pup. He stood at a distance, cradling and petting the animal.

Anne laughed quickly. "Yes. It's all right, Ben. He was

just upset." She twitched her skirt, turning and twisting the belt. "Can you send five more men tomorrow?"

"Sure," he said. "Anne, I'm sorry about that damn dog. Are you sure he didn't hurt you?"

Her hand was behind her. "Yes, Ben. Of course." She walked away, her slippers turning over in the sand. She tucked a wisp of hair behind her ear and climbed the trembling steps. She was a secretary for the Solina Lumber Company. Ben saw her often about the Solina contracts for prisoner labor.

"Du!" Ben said to the man in the sawdust-tufted jersey. "What's wrong with that hound?"

The prisoner laid his face against the puppy, touching the fur, watching the girl mounting step by step to the loft.

"You must remember, Herr Hoffman," he said absently. "This dog has never in his whole life even seen a woman."

Strewn about in the sand were the papers she had brought. Ben picked them up, stuffed them into the Manila envelope. He put it under the iron wrench on the canvas seat, and started the jeep. He backed the motor, wheels slipping, and drove slowly up the rutted road and back on the highway.

Mutti was panicked, Ben thought. That's normal. Once he is around women and gets used to them he won't be so dangerous and vicious. It's normal. Brüste, too. Intellectual homosexual. Man needs woman. No women in men's prison. Brüste makes a woman within himself. The artist creating for the need. Logical, intelligent process. Normal.

I'm getting lonely myself. Anne, maybe. She's been talking more than lumber business lately. And she is pretty. Maybe she's interested.

Well, Ben thought, I'll try.

Back on the base, the last Kommando was the officers' mess. He braked at the loading platform, flipped the motor switch, and climbed on the fender, stepping from the hood to the landing. He went through a screen door into a kitchen where men in white bolero jackets carrying meal-heavy trays rushed past other oncoming men in white bolero jackets carrying clattering empty-plate-laden trays.

"Achtung!" Ben shouted.

The kitchen froze.

"Hello," Ben said.

"Guten Tag, Herr Hoffman!"

"Servus!"

"Grüss Gott!"

"Heil Hitler!"

"I'm hungry," he said. "And which one of you bastards said that?"

Bustle exploded again. A work table was cleared of pots and pans, a place set with silver and china. A burly black-haired cook swung open the heavy door of the walk-in refrigerator and stamped in. He came out, swung the great door shut, and plopped a filet mignon into a frying pan. Pineapple juice appeared suddenly before Ben, seated at the work table.

He ate, the black-haired cook standing beside him. Bread and butter, a quarter head of crisp green lettuce. White foaming milk in a pitcher, and the steak: hot juicy steak. *"Mahlzeit,"* said the cook. "I wish you a good appetite." He gave Ben a napkin.

"Herr Hoffman?"

"What?" Ben said thickly into the steak.

"You think Germans are stupid, don't you?"

Ben swallowed and wiped the crevice of his chin. "No. Why?"

"Do you think to fool us? Many of the guards are intelligence agents. We know you speak High German from the university. But these others! I, myself, could tell you what part of Germany each one comes from."

"You're crazy," Ben said. "I am the only one who speaks German. Who are these others?"

"Levin," the cook said. "Cohen. Irving Kind."

"Lump!" Ben said. He wiped his hands on the napkin, pushed back his chair. Standing up, he whispered loudly to the cook.

"Sie sind Juden. Jews speaking Yiddish. Which I, too, can speak if you wish." He laughed. *"Naar!* How come you can't tell a Jew when you see one?"

"What's so different about a Jew?" the cook asked.

Ben stopped at the screen door. He walked back to the cook. "Forgive me, my friend. Thank you for the steak. Your question is proper."

At the intersection before the barbed-wire square, a truck swung out wildly to miss the jeep. That Jerry, Ben thought, realizing that he had driven full-tilt through a Stop sign. Asking *me* the question I should have asked *him*. He turned the wheel angrily toward the compound.

In the clearing, hands on hips, Befehl stood. Ben stopped the jeep and blared the horn. The fat German sergeant trotted to the fence. "Are all the men inoculated?" Ben asked.

"All," said Befehl, "but one. That stiff-necked Tierdenken will not go."

"Where is he?"

"In the solitary cell." Befehl pointed across the street to the hut behind the gate shack.

Ben slid from the driver's seat and went into the shack. On makeshift chairs lounged two guards and a sergeant, watching coffee bubble in a blackened pot on an electric hotplate.

"You two men," he said, "go in the cell and take Tierdenken over to the hospital for a shot. Don't fool with him. Take him over."

The soldiers got to their feet. Slowly. "What a cinch you got," the short one said. Ben poured coffee into a mug and talked to the sergeant.

The coffee spilled on his shirt when the shouts and screams began. He ran out of the guard shack. The prisoners across the road raced to the barbed-wire fence.

Two guards were reeling out of the cell. The short one fingered a lump beneath his eye. The other, gasping for breath, stared at the door the prisoner had slammed behind them. Ben laughed. The prisoner came to the barred window, saw Ben, waved a hand and started laughing, too.

Politely, Ben asked him, "Only one answer?"

The German grinned through the bars. Ben went into the gate shack and picked up a long wooden nightstick. He went into the cell.

Tierdenken turned from the window, hunched his neck into his shoulders. He moved slowly, his face tight in an empty smile. Ben moved back, wrapping the leather thong around his knuckles, testing his grip on the grooved handle. The prisoner leaped, clutching Ben above the elbows. Ben thrust. The small round club end entered deeply into the belly flesh, driving air from Tierdenken's stomach. He doubled over, his hair brushing Ben's face. The club cracked across the top of the German's skull.

Ben shook the prisoner's hands away and stepped back.

Moving with underwater slowness, Tierdenken lurched crookedly through the doorway. Screaming, he crumpled to

the ground. He sat on the ground, screaming, his back against the wall. His hands came up to cup his head. Blood drops slid gently down his temple.

Lined up against the barbed-wire fence, the prisoners, watching across the road, laughed.

Ben slapped the club into the hands of a guard and went to the screaming prisoner.

"Enough theater," Ben said in German. "Are you ready for the needle?"

Ben helped the sobbing prisoner from the ground. The needle would be less painful, Ben told him.

Tierdenken stared at Ben, his face blank. Suddenly he stretched out his hand, smiling. Ben shook hands.

"Go over to the hospital by yourself and get inoculated," he said. "No guards. And come right back."

The German nodded. The prisoners shouted taunts. He slashed his hand through the air at them.

"*Ganz korrekt,* Herr Hoffman!" Befehl shouted across the road. "He needs strict discipline!"

Ben strode down the planked walk, his back held straight, his tongue clamped against the roof of his mouth. Sharp and shrill, like dogs treeing a fox, cries from the wire fence chased after him.

He pushed against the screen of the latrine and entered. He sat on a wooden seat, hanging his head between his knees. Water dripped from a faucet. A human head, Ben thought. Like splitting a melon on a concrete floor. Splat. Like a melon. Splash. Slamming up the seat of the next toilet bowl, he bent quickly, the porcelain corner of the water closet striking coldly at his temple. Pineapple juice was bitter. He wiped his mouth weakly with the back of his hand. He rose and turned the leaking faucet on full force, spraying water from the sink onto his trousers. He splashed water on his face and wiped it dry with a handkerchief.

CHAPTER TWO

AT the steps to the orderly room, Ben paused to look across the street at the compound. Only quiet groups were standing in the clearing and on the walks of the company rows. Two men, talking and waving their hands at each other, were taking a leisurely *Spaziergang*, strolling the inner perimeter of the wire fence. Ben looked up at the corner tower. Seated on a stool on the high platform, the guard leaned his forearms on the railing and placidly smoked a cigarette. His back was to the compound, and he was gazing at the far marsh beyond the camp. He turned his head and raised a languid hand to Ben. Ben entered the office.

The typewriter clacked. Above the striking keys, the company clerk said, "Captain's here, Ben. Wants to see you."

Walking past his desk, Ben looked at the sheet of paper in the machine. "Now is the time for all good men to cometo the aid oftheir party. Now is thetime for all goodmen . . ." He bent his head to see the clerk's face. The clerk smiled and nodded at the stripes on Ben's arm.

"Oh," Ben said.

In the office the captain sat in the swivel chair, leaning back, his Eisenhower jacket buttoned, his tie meticulously knotted, and reading a copy of *Life*. A stiff-visored cap sat on the desk blotter.

"Hello, stranger," Ben said.

"Hello, Hoffman." The captain put the magazine on the desk and picked up the cap. "We're going over to the confinement camp at Howard's branch camp. I want to talk to the five prisoners we have in solitary there."

"O.K." Ben said. "But why? You feeling guilty about your work?"

"Don't be wise, Hoffman." The captain pulled the brim of his cap forward on his head.

"Court-martial me," Ben said.

"Come on, boy. Let's go."

"O.K., Captain."

In town the sea wall curved in a sweep around the Battery. Parking the jeep near the bridge that arched high and thin across the bay, Ben and the captain climbed out and stretched their legs. "Half-hour for a few beers will never hurt us, Hoffman."

"I agree," Ben said.

In the dark, cool saloon they sat in a booth. A platter of cold shrimp with hot sauce and a pitcher of beer. The shrimp were pink giant prawns. "Like peanuts," Ben said, peeling the clear shell. The waitress picked up the pitcher.

"Captain," Ben said, "do me a favor, will you?"

"What?" The officer picked something from his teeth.

"You know the guards we have are nuts. They're psychos. That's why they're here. Most of their records state that they are forbidden to carry firearms because of emotional instability. Raffia's carbine went off again last night while he was on tower duty. He says he doesn't know how it happened. The gate shack looks like Swiss cheese. And Tennyson put a bullet hole in the stove last week. Do me a favor. Arm the guards with whistles. Just whistles. The guards are a hell of a lot more dangerous than the prisoners."

The captain laughed. "Hoffman, I hear your promotion came through."

"Yeh," Ben said. "Thanks."

The waitress in the flower-printed frilled apron brought the amber-filled pitcher back, suds flecking the sides.

Back in the jeep, Ben blinked. "You drive, Captain," he said. "After that dark *Bierstube,* this light blinds me." Cobblestone streets and the moving jeep and Ben's head bounced up and down. Shakily he climbed over the metal-frame back and lay down on the rear seat, his legs hanging over the side. He woke from a thick sleep to belch gently. Vaguely he said, to no one, "Good shrimp."

A flat bridge hooked the city to the island on which the branch camp stood. The captain turned the jeep onto a cindered area. Tents raised on wooden platforms housed the guard company. Over the canvas flaps of a large tent planked up on the sides hung a sign: ORDERLY ROOM. Behind the row of tents, toward the river, a wire fence locked a long log building into a square of cinders. The punishment barracks. Heavy and solid, white mortar roughly plastered be-

tween dark-barked logs, tiny barred windows high and spaced along the side. Across the marshy field the prisoners' camp lay in saw-toothed grass, a bank in the rear falling away sharply to the river. Booths on towers guarded the four corners of the prison. Three men reared a human tower in the prison yard. Toppling, the gymnasts fell to blankets spread out on the ground. Two of the men leaped to the shoulders of the third and formed a Y.

Lieutenant Howard welcomed the jeep before the gate of the punishment yard. The two officers greeted each other warmly. Ben mumbled, "Hello," and stiffened his legs.

The guard unlocked the gate and crunched across the clinkers to the log building. Rapid tattoos of wood pounding against wood beat out to Ben and the officers in the yard. The guard's club, rebounding from the doors to rouse the prisoners, transformed the cramped cells into wooden drums. Five men came hastily through the door, buttoning their pants, brushing back their hair with their hands.

The five men ranged in line, each stretching his left arm sideways to the shoulder of the man beside him. Intervals established, the arms dropped to touch index fingers to trouser seams. Ben blinked his eyes and squared his shoulders. Gray undershirts repeated the black PW before him space after space. Notes on a page of music.

"Still stand!" he shouted.

Bodies shot erect and quivered, strings in released bows. He peered at the Germans and grinned. The captain began a speech. Ben translated, his face taut. "We have been treating you as human beings, but for that treatment"—was *Behandlung* the word for treatment?—"you have no respect. Here is new treatment. Each of you is given bread and water for fourteen days; each of you is confined for thirty days in solitary. Every fifteen minutes night and day each of you is awakened by a club beating on your doors. Night and day, every fifteen minutes. If this is what you respect, this is what you receive."

Ben stopped for breath. "Since you have all memorized the Geneva Regulations you know that this is *not* forbidden by that law. Spare me that nonsense."

The men stood stiffly at attention.

"Any questions?" Ben shouted.

A prisoner stepped forward.

"We would like very much to go back to work."

"You will," Ben said, "at the end of thirty days. Step back!"

A second man stepped forth. The prisoner sentenced by the colonel for disrespect to women. He had whistled from an army truck.

"I wish to say that I do not blame the colonel. We Germans were victors all over Europe and we know how aggravating the actions of prisoners can seem."

"What did he say?" The captain's hand was on Ben's sleeve. Ben shook it off.

"You Germans were victors! Only to your type of mind could that occur! This is a matter of decency and politeness, not victor and vanquished! Whoever offends against decency is punished. There is only one set of laws in this country, regardless of who breaks them. You are judged under the same laws as are American soldiers. We are interested only in humanity—not persecution!"

The prisoner stammered. "I—I am trying to be reasonable, Herr Hoffman. Pardon, but I have seen *you* whistle at girls."

"Maybe," Ben said. "But the colonel hasn't."

"My thinking is European." The prisoner shook his head. "You must realize that. But I am trying to learn."

"Sicher," Ben said. "Next!"

A thickset German stamped forward, heel grinding into the cinders, his heavy face trying massively for a smile. "Please, will I be transferred? I will not offend again, I promise."

Kracht! Ben thought. Our boy. He had stared Ben in the eye and torn the brochure into ragged bits, page by page, the photographs of bony belly-caved bodies stacked cordwise at Belsen, the pictures of Polish prisoners' huge grinning heads rolling idiotically above tiny skeleton torsos. *"Propaganda,"* he had said. Ben had stood patiently and watched him tear each page. Ben had picked up a fragment of a picture showing a Jewish corpse, dead how long—a day?—with ribs projecting through shrunken taut skin, a sudden falling vacancy below the rib cage, skin a bare inch from the spine, the sudden swelling of skin to cover pelvic bones, the hollow cup of shrunken loin between the crests. The legs were articulated bones lapped loosely by wrinkled skin. This was Kracht's second major offense. His first: refusing to have his hair cut to the regulation inch-and-a-half brush. The first thirty days, Ben thought, he had served at our camp. He had eaten from

our mess hall, received reading matter. A complete vacation. He had grinned at us the whole thirty days because we were so soft. The prisoners used to complain to me, he eats better than we do and doesn't have to work. Is that a punishment? So our hero thought he'd have another vacation. Kracht! Here he finds it different. No physical punishment—but not quite so pleasant and *gemütlich* as before. And this "German soldier" had spent part of his time in his cell crying. The guards had told him he'd be transferred to Oklahoma, the disciplinary camp for incorrigibles. The naked bayonet camp.

"Kracht!" Ben said. Kracht's eyes wavered under Ben's stare. A long minute. The officers talked in low voices, waiting. "You will be given *one* more chance."

"Dismissed!"

The men marched into the log building; the guard, thumb hooked in his carbine strap, shambled behind, scratching the stubble on his face. He pushed the last man into the doorway.

Ben turned slowly to the officers. He wondered . . . The prisoners had looked cowed.

"Good night, Hoffman!" The captain seized Ben's shoulder. "What in heaven's name were you snarling about?"

"Snarling?" Ben said, blinking. "I was concentrating on translating."

Air rushing over the windshield washed sleep from Ben's face. The captain skidded the jeep into the driveway of a small cottage. Newly transplanted flowers, the earth about them still moist, hung limp blossoms from bending fragile stalks along the low picket fence. Over a small gate arched a latticework.

The captain opened the gate and said, "My leave papers arrived, Hoffman. Fort Jackson is sending down a major to take over for the fifteen days. Keep things running."

"O.K., Captain." Ben slid over into the driver's seat and shifted the motor into first gear. "Have a good time."

"We'll leave day after tomorrow," the captain said. "I won't be out to the camp. We have some things to do here. Call me if you need me."

Ben kept the clutch pedal depressed, and watched the captain's young wife kiss her husband at the door. A gay-colored curtain bellied out from a cottage window. She saw

Ben over the captain's shoulder and waved. Ben made a half-salute and drove away.

I stay to watch, Ben thought. Somebody else's wife. Did they marry before the war? How does a man in the Army meet a girl and know her long enough to love her and to want to marry her?

The jeep swung into a space between the two six-by-six supply trucks in the company motor pool lot. Ben jumped out and walked toward the barracks. He pulled his tie through the slipknot and hung the khaki strip through his belt.

"Herr Hoffman!"

Josef, the handyman, clattered in shower clogs of wood down the planked walk. He met Ben at the barracks stoop and handed him a package. A page of notebook paper, folded over two squares of cardboard, was sealed with cellophane tape.

"*Für Sie,* Herr Hoffman." His hand on the stomach of his stained PW undershirt, Josef made an elaborate bow.

Ben slit the tape with his fingernail. Inside was a hard-rubber comb. Bought with prisoner coupons in the prisoner post exchange.

Josef said, "You have our dignity to think of. Give me the old comb."

Ben took the old snaggle-tooth comb from his pocket and handed it over. Josef dropped it into the trash barrel by the stoop.

Ben paused, his foot on the step, looking at the cardboard and the cellophane tape. He turned and walked across the grass to his office. From a desk drawer he lifted a large filled envelope. He took a roll of cellophane tape from the drawer and dropped it into the envelope, folded the top and stapled it together.

He opened the door to the orderly room. "Corporal," he said. "This bag has the pieces of the brochure Kracht tore up. Send it over with the next truck to Lieutenant Howard's camp. Have the driver tell Kracht to make the torn whole again, if he likes. Tell the driver to be sure to say, *'If he likes.'* "

"Does Kracht understand English?" the corporal said.

"He'll understand that."

In the barracks a radio twanged hillbilly music. Ben lifted the footlocker lid and took out a fresh towel and the

toilet kit. Two men straddled a bunk by the door, gin rummy cards spread between them on the dark brown blanket. Five dollars a game. "How much does he owe you now, Paul?" Ben said, pausing by the door. "Three hundred and seventy-five dollars, Ben." The loser looked up and said, "He owes me five hundred from casino."

The latrine was crowded with men washing up for supper. Ben spread soap dish and toothbrush and toothpaste and comb on the wet shelf above the sink. He twisted in the rubber plug and held open both faucets, filling the bowl. Pancho was soaping his face at the next sink. "Pancho," Ben said. "*Nosemos compadres en la milicia.* Is that right?"

"*Si, si,*" Pancho said, a soap bubble popping on his lips. "You're learning fast."

"Good God, Hoffman," exclaimed a voice from the row of water closets behind the row of washing men, "do you speak Spanish, too?"

Ben laughed. At the end sink, a lean boy from Tennessee halted a razor swath down his lathered face. "Sho," he said, admiringly, "he can speak anything, German, Spanish, anything! He's Jew. Ain't you, Hoffman?"

Ben chuckled and shook out his towel. "Tell 'em about me, Tennyson."

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN the recruiting officers had found that Ben had a glass eye, they would not accept him. He went with his friends from the journalism school to the Army and the Navy and the Marines. He waited in the anteroom on a bench while his friends signed. In the first months of the war, long lines formed before each recruiting office.

Girls, misty-eyed and solicitous, gave farewell parties. Each departing boy left Ben more alone. The impulse grew more savage and more shameful at each party to tear the glass eye from the socket and float it in a punch bowl. The shame was beyond apology or explanation.

Ben had lost the eye when he was seven. He and his friends found a cartridge and pounded it with a brick. The .22 exploded; the cartridge jacket split and a fragment drove into Ben's eye. Doctors removed the eye. Time spent in the hospitals kept Ben from sports. Other children played baseball and football. Ben stayed in the house and read. He did not like his childhood.

Doctors, hospitals, operations made his parents poor. Installed in the socket was a gold ball on which the glass eye moved. In his small town, his childhood had been spent with adults. He had lived on the pity which excused all his failures. He was glad to go to the college in Philadelphia where no one knew he had a glass eye. He was sick of the child who loved pity.

At the end of freshman year his draft call arrived. Without hope Ben attended the physical examination. Naked, he moved from booth to booth and stood at the final desk. Surprised, he saw stamped in red letters across his form: LIMITED SERVICE. Later he was massed with other men before a podium. An officer shouted, "In a moment, after you take the oath of allegiance, you will be members of the

Army of the United States. You will be given seven days to settle your affairs. Raise your right hand and repeat after me . . ."

Ben repeated the words. From the corner of his eye, he saw rejected men leaning against the wall. ". . . so help me God!"

Although his mother's face shadowed, she did not cry. His sixteen-year-old brother was bitterly jealous. The baby sister said, "Gosh." His father, shaking hands with him before he boarded the bus for Fort Dix, smiled and said, "I envy you, son. Take care."

After three days of reeling from needles into tests, under the constant shouts of noncommissioned officers, he was ordered to pack. He asked someone to call his home and tell his parents not to come to visit him at Fort Dix. Barracks bags hanging over his shoulders, bumping his thighs and knees, he stumbled with other recruits into the train shed.

"Where am I going?" he asked the corporal in charge.

The corporal was young and downy-faced. "Soldier," he said pityingly, "you haven't been in long, have you?"

"Too damn long," Ben mumbled, the knotted ropes of the bulky bags cutting into his shoulder.

Bunks were three high in the troop train. Men sat and yawned and played cards and filed through a baggage car to have food thrown into their mess kits. Ten days later they climbed from the train, barracks bags swinging, and into waiting army trucks. The station sign read: PORTLAND, OREGON.

They drove into an old frontier fort. Vancouver Barracks, Washington. The men were assembled and marched three miles into a forest. They stopped at a group of new-built structures. Bedding was issued. Fifty men moved into each wooden barracks. A tiny stove glowed at one end. Cold air blew through the cracks. The men made their beds.

"Attention!" an officer shouted. "This barracks is quarantined for two weeks. No one will leave. A report has come in that a man shipped from this room yesterday has spinal meningitis." The officer looked at the blank faces, smiled and said, "Tough," and left.

Each man was issued a large disc of sulfanilamide three times a day. Ben sat on his bunk, gulping the pills. A sergeant led calisthenics in the barracks every morning. The men looked wanly through the window of their prison.

After the two weeks training began. On the freezing barren plain they marched themselves into a sweat, learning left and right until it became instinctive. Ben listened numbly to the sergeant's recital of threats. He had a constant headache.

Against the gray sky Mount Hood rose, huge in the distance. During the ten-minute breaks, Ben stared across the field at the winter-scarred, snow-hooded peak. Mountains, he thought, the Cascade range of mountains. Not the swamps and flats of South Jersey. Mountain rivers, bear, deer. Salmons leaping *up* waterfalls. What does this wild country look like from that peak? Ben sighed. We'll probably be marched all the way to the top—with full field pack.

On the range Ben qualified as marksman. He fired in a driving rain, water rolling into his eyes. Each time a bullet hit the distant canvas target or the wind blew, every sodden patch on the canvas fell off. Every man qualified.

The camp trained quartermaster companies. Ben was in a salvage-repair unit. Powerful tractors hauled long trailers fitted out for cobblers and tailors. Men were taught metal craft to repair mess kits.

Ben was sent to clerk school. In an unheated tin hut he sat, crouching deep in his field jacket, wool underwear itching. A corporal lectured. Each army function had a government form. Each government form had a number. Each numbered form required many carbon copies. Each copy had a destination. Each destination must be recorded. Company strength was recorded daily on Morning Reports. False entries, whether willful or careless, would be punished. Memo Receipts established accountability or responsibility or both. Words floated and Ben drowsed and itched.

Under the dim light of a naked hanging bulb, the corporal taught graves registration. The corporal's voice was dull, and dead men were another government issue.

After eight weeks they were sent to San Bernardino, California. The Desert Training Center. Ben was led through a desolate field to a consignment of shoes. Cases were stacked under canvas roofs held high by poles. Wearing shorts and a helmet liner, Ben walked around twice a day, counting shoes in broken cartons. From a field kitchen men ate dehydrated milk, dehydrated eggs, canned butter. Food smelled like formaldehyde. Ben was always thirsty in the dry burning heat. Salt was mixed with water in the Lister bag.

The second week Ben dug his first sump hole. The com-

pany marched in formation, and the sergeant hit Ben's rifle barrel as Ben marched past. "Get that rifle at the proper angle!" Ben jerked at the butt and said, "Yes, sir!" The sergeant ran to catch up with him and yelled, "Wise guy! I'll see you after formation!" He made Ben dig a hole in the sandy soil, six feet by six feet by six feet. It took Ben a day and a half. The sergeant made him throw all the dirt back into the hole. "Not so smart, now, Hoffman, are you?" the sergeant said. "No, sir," Ben said.

The sergeant screamed and made him dig another hole, six by six by six.

"What did I do?" Ben asked, his voice breaking. He wept with frustration while he dug. "Wise guy," the sergeant said. "You know what you're doing, wise guy."

The company clerk visited Ben at the hole. "What the hell ails that guy?" Ben asked. "Is he nuts?"

"Boy," the company clerk said, "is he pissed-off at you!"

"Why?" Ben said. "Why?" He threw the spade from the hole. "I fall over backwards trying to please the guy. I treat him with respect. I do what he tells me. What did I do?"

"Don't you really know?" the clerk asked.

"No," Ben said.

"Just before that formation when you caught hell," the clerk said, "the sergeant was visiting the orderly room of the company across the road. Their captain came in and the sergeant said something flip to him. The officer blew his top and gave him hell for not saying 'sir' to him and for not coming to attention. He made the sergeant stand at attention like a rookie."

"What's that got to do with me?" Ben said. "That's not my fault."

"Why, boy, you're a hero to the company," the clerk said.

"Why?"

"You're either brave or stupid," the clerk said. "Where did you ever learn to say 'sir' to a noncommissioned officer?"

Ben kept his mouth shut. Two days later he was called into the orderly room. The sergeant shoved a form in front of him and ordered him to sign.

A month later he was ordered to dress in class A uniform and pack his barracks bags. A truck took him to Pasadena Junior College. He was in an army specialized training unit.

"What is it?" Ben asked.

"What is it?" the man at the desk said. "You trying to kid me? You volunteered for it!"

Men who had scored high in the army general classification test were to be sent to college as language or engineering students. A battery of tests was given. Ben scored high in language aptitude.

He was sent to Stanford University to study German. He wandered under the colonnades roofed in red tile, seeing through a graceful arch of thin pillars the mosaic face of the chapel depicting the Sermon on the Mount. The chapel was surrounded by a quadrangle of great stone buildings with towers and bays roofed in the red tile. He felt strangely nervous in the peace of the campus.

He was quartered with three other men in a room in Toyon Hall. Each soldier served a week as a cadet officer. Ben studied in the quiet evenings, sitting in the high-ceilinged lobby. Many of the men spoke five and six languages. They knew well Prague and Budapest and Vienna and Paris. Ben listened. The halls echoed with languages. Croat, Bulgar, Slovenian, Flemish. A wing was occupied by Greeks who, to their voluble disgust, were assigned Italian. Toyon Hall had an aristocracy: the 9-L's, accomplished linguists who awaited special assignments.

Ben was a 3-L, a novice who attended classes in a specified language. After three terms of intensive instruction, he would emerge as a 6-L.

Mornings he had four hours of German conversation, reading and composition. Afternoons he attended lectures given in German, ranging over geology, psychology, economics, history, political science. Each European country was studied: the *arrondissements* and *départements* of France; the corporate state of Italy; the structure of Germany. The science embracing all was Geopolitik. Ben liked the work. He learned quickly, pleased by the compliments given his accent.

He took part hesitantly in seminar discussions. His classmates were doctors of philosophy, professors, writers, cosmopolites. They listened to him and did not patronize him.

He liked to argue. Often his view was opposed by the entire class. He worried that he rarely shared the point of view of those who knew more than he. He found himself stubborn. "I don't care whether you agree with me," he said. "I just want to be sure you understand me."

The word "Nazi" lost shape in his mind. He said, in an

economics class, "Blame solves no situation. You tell me about inflation under the Weimar Republik. That situation could not continue to exist. Those who allowed that situation to exist are to blame, not the Nazis—if you want to talk about blame. Nazis are the monstrous result of a situation. Nazis are a consequence. So are Fascists. So are Communists."

A classmate shook his head. "I've seen everything now. A Nazi Jew!"

"No," Ben said, "although I don't doubt that some Jews would have been Nazis if they hadn't been disqualified by the rules. No. Nazis should be killed. I just want to understand what a Nazi is. They're monsters, but still they're human beings. What the hell makes human beings Nazis? I want to know."

A gray-haired soldier asked, "Ben, what makes you sure Nazis are human beings?"

"A man is a human being," Ben said. "Nazis are not a different species; they're warped human beings. All I'm asking is: What warped them? What makes Nazis? Nazis are a horror because they are taught to hate entire catalogues. If we hate categorically, too, what difference between us and Nazis?"

Ben loved to hear himself talk. Words built a solid structure of logic. Argument was a craft. He felt an artisan's pride.

"It is necessary to kill Nazis," he said. "It is even more necessary to admit Nazis are made and not born."

He read volumes of German propaganda. Goebbels. Rosenberg. Propagandists never confused emotion with intellect. Attempting to destroy an emotional attitude by reasonable argument was like mating a cat with a dog. He soon wearied of marking contradictions in Nazi texts. Nazis had not created the emotional climate in Germany. They had exploited it.

The sediment of that disturbed propaganda drifted down and left for Ben a simple clarity. Nazis hated Jews wholly. If Ben were to hate Nazis wholly, Ben would be a Nazi. *Then* he would be a Nazi Jew. Hate was a disease to be examined. Ben disliked Nazis too much to be one.

Frau Kastelle, the German conversation instructor, delighted in Ben. A generous, full-breasted woman, she had attended schools in Switzerland, France and Germany. She was effervescent and delightful, exuding charm and faint

musk. Her parents were wealthy American brewers. After class she invited Ben to have coffee with her in the snack bar.

"I just had to tell you, Mr. Hoffman," she said, leaning over the table, covering his hand, "how perfectly wonderful I think it is—how broadminded!—how strong!—for you to recognize that Germans are basically a kind and cultured people, that their music and traditions are beautiful. Especially since you're a—since you perhaps would have a stronger reason to be unforgiving."

Ben sat. He said nothing. He drank the warm coffee, feeling his face grow red. He put the cup down. "Frau Kastelle," he said, "you embarrass me. I'm not sentimental about Germans. I certainly don't forgive them. I just don't want to be as depraved as those Germans are. I'm sorry you misunderstood me. I never said a word about forgiving Nazis."

"Well, Herr Hoffman," she said, lifting her cup in salute, "I still think the way you feel is wonderful. *Prosit!*"

Ben touched his cup to hers. *"Prosit!"*

You don't understand me, Ben thought complacently, but it's all right. If I seem to agree with no man, it's because I agree with all men. I am most like all men when I am most like *me*. I've found a truth. I am free of all men because *I* am all men—stop, he thought, my truth is close to the Nazi.

Ben fell in love with himself. Although hesitancy, unsureness and fear were still with him, he even liked himself.

He was graduated in nine months as a 6-L and was awarded a certificate in German Area and Language. The Army Specialized Training Program crumbled. Infantrymen were needed in Europe. Soldiers on college campuses were an arrant luxury. Companies were shipped from comfortable Toyon Hall to infantry divisions on maneuvers. Soldiers were fighting desperately in Italy. Ben could name every one of the *compartimenti* of Italy in Italian.

His company climbed aboard a train on the Stanford platform and rode to central California. They left the train, swung the barracks bags on their shoulders and marched to waiting trucks. The vehicles rolled through Camp Roberts and into the mountains. From the back of the truck high on a mountain trail, Ben saw a Spanish hacienda sprawling in the midst of desolate brush in a valley far below. The first sign of life in miles and hours of the monotonous drive.

Their guide pointed. "That place belongs to the guy who gave this country to the Army," he said.

"Where are we?" Ben said.

"Hunter-Liggett Reservation," the soldier said. "The private estate of Mr. Hearst."

The trucks stopped on a high plateau. Pup tents stretched in even lines from the dirt road. Unshaven soldiers shouted, "Here come the brains!" "College boys!" A soldier walked to the trucks, rolling his hips. "Welcome, girls," he said.

An officer whirled his hand above his head and pointed at the ground. "Dismount!" he roared at the trucks. "Form two ranks!" The men jumped from the trucks, dragging the barracks bags.

Ben was led away to a pup tent by a soldier from B Company, a Portuguese boy from Boston. Ben crawled in, pulling the bags behind him onto wet blankets laid on muddy ground. The tent reeked with a musty clinging odor. In the amber light Ben saw on the blanket a deep bucket helmet. A candle stub stood in its own wax. The Portuguese crawled in after him, pushing him against the canvas. He pulled a pack of cards from his fatigue jacket and said to Ben, "Got any money?"

At four in the morning a hand grasped Ben's leg and pulled him partially from the tent. "You're on K.P. Report to the kitchen tent in five minutes." Pouring rain drove through the tent. He threw the Portuguese boy's arm from his chest. He lit a cigarette in the dark and pulled damp fatigues over his long underwear.

The men ate breakfast in the dawn. Ben, clutching with both hands a handle of the garbage can, struggled through the mud. The man on the other handle muttered. The damp air was cold and penetrating. Ben slipped and righted himself. The can slopped over, splashing onto his jacket.

"Move, Jew bastard!" the mess sergeant shouted across the field.

Ben stood in the mud. He blinked. "Me?" he said incredulously.

The short man bared yellow teeth. "You, little boy! You in a man's army now, little scholar! Move!"

The two men stumbled forward, shoes pulling in the mud. The sergeant hooted. Ben's eye blurred. Sliding into a ravine, the two men tilted the can, spilling garbage into a hole.

They carried the empty can back across the field and placed it by the greasy black stove.

"All right. You. Jewboy! Get brosh and clean garbage can! Scrob clean! You hear!"

Ben was chilled. "Sergeant," he said. "You can't do that." The grizzled man was infantry. Hard. Tough. "Can you?" Ben added, timidly.

"What!" The sergeant took his hands from his jacket. "What you sayin'!"

Ben pressed his teeth together to stop the trembling. "Sergeant, you can't call me Jew bastard. It's against regulations."

The sergeant balled a fist and stepped into the mud. "What!" he screamed.

Ben took a skillet from the stove. "You can't hit me either," he chattered. "It's against regulations." I'm a goddam baby, Ben thought. What's going to happen?

"Jew son a bitch!" the sergeant screamed. The men stopped in the mud, watching.

"I wouldn't call you a Polack bastard," Ben whispered. He raised the skillet. I don't care if they give me twenty years, he thought. I don't care. "I'm going to the captain," Ben said. "You can't call me that. It's against regulations. You'll lose your stripes."

The sergeant glared, leathery face darkening. His chin jerked. "Son a bitch," he said. "I kill you."

"You'll lose your stripes," Ben said. "Your four stripes." You're stopped, Ben thought. A phony.

The sergeant turned in the mud. "Get back to work!" he yelled at the men. He walked away.

"Clean your own garbage can," Ben said to his back. "I'm going to my tent." The sergeant stopped.

"They all heard you," Ben said. "I can go to the adjutant general." The sergeant walked on. "Think twice next time!" Ben said.

He stamped through the mud to his pup tent. It must really be against regulations, he thought.

He lay in the tent half an hour and came back to clean the can. The mess sergeant didn't speak to him.

The division was experimental. All men and equipment moved by foot. No vehicles were assigned. Every man carried over one hundred pounds strapped to his shoulders on a packboard. They worked in the mountains at eight thousand

feet. Mortars, machine guns, stoves were disassembled and strapped to the steel metal frames. A mortar plate was strapped to Ben's back and two men helped him to his feet. The men marched up mountains, leaning forward into the incline, using machetes to cut trail through the brush. Ben walked, head bent, staring at his moving feet. Strong men fell out. Ben did not.

His back straightened under the weight.

He woke every morning, stiff and cramped under the blankets heavy with rain. He wrapped cigarettes and matches in a handkerchief each night and put them in a shoe. He couldn't move until he smoked, the cigarette easing the night ache.

The blanket stayed wet on dry nights. The Portuguese tentmate was sent to the hospital for enuresis. The squad leader laughed when Ben complained. "He's been wetting the bed for months, bucking for discharge," the squad leader said. "Nobody would sleep with him. That's why you had a ready-made tent when you came, Hoffman!" Ben washed the blankets.

Trucks were sent from Camp Roberts to take the company to the station hospital for port of embarkation examination.

Naked, Ben was passed swiftly from booth to booth. He followed an arrow saying EYE, EAR AND NOSE. He sat in a chair and a doctor pulled down the lower lid of Ben's right eye, shining a pencil ray of bright light into the pupil. The officer put his thumb under Ben's left eye. Ben jerked back.

The doctor put his hand roughly behind Ben's head. "No funny business," he said, jamming his thumb on the cheekbone.

"Don't, Doctor," Ben said. "It'll fall out."

The doctor looked at Ben, leaned forward and peered into the eye. He held the light near the pupil. "What's wrong, boy?" he said.

"Glass, sir," Ben said.

The doctor put the light on a tray and stood up. "What the hell you doing in the infantry?" he said angrily.

Ben rose, lean and naked. "Doctor," he said, "it wasn't my idea."

The officer drew a red circle on Ben's form and sent him to the last desk. "Get transferred," he said. "You're wasting our time and yours in the infantry."

Ben took the paper from the officer and turned at the door. "I'm as good a soldier as any man in the outfit," he said.

"You probably are," the doctor said. "This isn't my idea, either."

Three months later Ben was sent to Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and put into a barracks where detached men awaited assignments.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE barracks in Fort Jackson were filled with defective men. The aged, the asthmatic, the wounded, the moronic, the malcontent lounged in the detached enlisted men's barracks, playing cards, disappearing through the several doors when the approach of an officer was signaled. Ben learned to slink with the veterans. Nights were spent at the post movie house or the enlisted men's lounges. They were given no passes to Columbia.

Ben asked the first sergeant for a furlough. "I've been on the move for eighteen months, sergeant, and I haven't even been given a three-day pass. I haven't been home since I got in."

The sergeant's desk was covered with pictures of a woman and two children. He was wiping the glass fronts with a handkerchief. "Get lost, boy," he said. "Keep out of sight. We can't get nothing."

"We're supposed to get thirty days furlough a year," Ben said. "I haven't had one day leave in a year and a half."

The sergeant polished his pictures. "Keep out of sight," he said. "Keep your mouth shut and keep out of sight. This is a good deal, boy. Don't spoil it."

"All right, Sergeant," Ben said.

The sergeant said through the closing door, "Don't be conspicuous, boy."

A week later at morning formation, the sergeant counted off fifteen men in the front rank. "You fifteen men pack," he said. "You're going to the German prisoner-of-war unit here. The rest are dismissed." He turned to the company clerk. "Take down their names." Ben was number twelve.

He stuffed his barracks bags, knotted them together, and waited outside, eager to go. The sergeant came from the office. Ben said, "Thanks, Sergeant." The sergeant turned. "For what?"

At lunch in the guard mess hall, Ben was served by German prisoners in starched white mess jackets. They were cheerful and alert. The guards were glum. A yellow-haired meager-faced boy next to Ben breathed so loudly and raspingly that Ben found himself breathing in sympathetic rhythm. The next man, spindly and hollow-cheeked, ate a mound of mashed potatoes with a spoon. A heavy man with a blank face, food packed in his cheek like a wad of tobacco, munched steadily. Ben felt curiously alone, grateful for the prisoners appearing often beside him, reaching for his glass, pointing at his plate, asking with a smile always, "More?"

Next morning Ben was issued a wooden club with a leather thong attached. He was led to two trucks in which German prisoners were packed. A list of ninety German names was put into his hand.

"What shall I do?" Ben said.

"Keep 'em company," the sergeant said and waved the trucks on. They drove past the entrance booth out onto the highway. The trucks turned left onto a dirt road and ground slowly over deep ruts into a forest. Branches broke off overhead against the truck bodies.

The trucks rumbled on, climbing and lurching as the forest thickened. Emerging into a clearing, the vehicles stopped. Men jumped from the tailgates. Ben climbed from the cab. The trucks backed around and lumbered back on the trail. He looked about him, club dangling from his wrist, roster crumpled in his hand. He was alone with the prisoners.

The men walked around the clearing, talking and laughing. Birds shrieked in high branches. Ben stood, watching the ninety bronzed men, the long bills of the *Afrika Korps* caps shading their foreheads. He gripped the club, shifting his feet on the aromatic pine bed beneath. His stomach growled.

In the center of the clearing a tall Nazi shouted. The men grouped, snapped out their arms to space themselves, and stood in four precise ranks. The tall man shouted in German. Ben could not understand a word. His fingers white on the club, he put his back against a tree.

The men broke ranks, spread into the forest. Three men brought back armfuls of branches and built a fire. They set a jug and a hamper by the blaze and walked into the woods.

The tall German said to Ben in English, "I go now to oversee the men. If you become hungry, sandwiches are in the basket. Coffee is in the thermos. The men have a

fire for you. If you wish to sleep, I will wake you before the trucks return."

Ben said, automatically, "Thank you." The German smiled and stepped into the forest. Ben walked around the fire. Except for distant cries, he was alone. Puzzled, he sat down, his back against a tree.

He roused himself, lit a cigarette, pulled the thong of the club through his belt, squared his shoulders self-consciously, and walked into the woods. A shout of *"Achtung!"* startled him. Through the trees he saw men standing at attention, facing him. Ben stared. Experimentally he said, "At ease." The men separated and lifted a heavy log, carrying it to a pile. Ben walked to the stack and looked, his face puzzled. A prisoner pointed. "For the trucks. Later." He mimicked throwing a log into a vehicle. Ben nodded.

Late in the day Ben returned to the fire. The German leader was there, drinking a tin mug of black coffee. The prisoner looked up, smiled, and poured a mug for Ben.

"Danke," Ben said.

"You speak German?" the prisoner said.

"Yes," Ben said. "A little. I learned it in the university."

"Your German is very good," the prisoner said. "You have no accent. From where in Germany do you come?"

Ben crouched by the fire and looked at the German. The prisoner's face was sincerely curious. "My German is not that good," Ben said. "Do not flatter me. I was born and bred in a small town in New Jersey."

"Truly?" the German said. "Your German is so perfect that I cannot believe a foreigner can learn it so well."

Ben sipped the cool coffee, studying the German's face. The prisoner held up the jug, inquiringly. Ben covered his tin cup with his hand and said, "Thank you, no."

"Pardon me," the German said, "may I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"What is your name?"

"Hoffman. Ben Hoffman."

"Doch! I thought so. That is a German name. Your parents are German. From what part of Germany do they come?"

"No," Ben said. "It is not a German name." He rose and rubbed an ache in his thigh. He wrapped the thong

of his club absently around his wrist, bringing the handle closer to his palm. "It is a Jewish name."

"Oh?" the prisoner said. He nodded understandingly. "Many Jews have German names." He relaxed, lying full length before the fire. He looked up pleasantly at Ben. "You are Jewish?"

"Yes," Ben said, fingers touching the handle.

The German laughed and pointed. "This is ridiculous, don't you think? Ninety prisoners and one guard, armed with a club. Alone in the quiet forest."

"Ninety Nazis," Ben said in English. He cleared his throat. "Why ridiculous? Do we need more guards?"

"Speak German," the prisoner said. "You speak German better than I speak English. There are not ninety Nazis here, Herr Hoffman. Maybe ten or eleven, no more."

"Are you one?" Ben said in English.

"Yes," the German said. "Please speak in German. You speak High German and it is a pleasure to hear a cultured tongue after listening to my fellow bumpkins."

Ben laughed uncertainly. "Thank you. I will speak German, my friend, if you will speak English. I get a certain pleasure from hearing you speak my language."

"Agreed," the prisoner said.

"You're a Nazi?" Ben said. He sat near the fire, his back pressed against the trunk of a tree. "Tell me why you are a Nazi."

The prisoner laughed. "It is adventure. I enjoyed it."

Ben said boldly, "Tell me why you hate Jews."

"I?" the prisoner said. "I hate Jews? Nonsense."

"You are a Nazi, and you have never done anything to Jews?"

"Herr Hoffman," the German said, "I was a *Gruppenführer* in the *Jugend*—the youth movement, you know?—when I was sixteen. I led two groups to burn Jewish synagogues in Stuttgart. I remember how funny one old Rabbi looked when I put the torch in his hand and made him light the building!"

Ben said calmly, "You tell me this to prove you do not hate Jews?"

The prisoner rose and walked to a jacket hanging on a low limb. Ben rose. The prisoner took a cigarette package from a pocket. He shook the package and held it out to Ben.

"Thanks," Ben said wonderingly. The prisoner bent and pulled a burning twig from the fire, held it to Ben's cigarette and lit his own.

"I do not hate Jews," he said. "I told you I enjoyed it."

"And you are a Nazi now?"

The prisoner shrugged. "There is no Nazi to be now. The fools out there—" he pointed into the woods—"do not see facts. I see facts. We have lost the war already. I want to be in the American Army now. You have such a *beautiful* army, so much of everything. Now I want to be an American soldier. I want to see Asia and fight the little yellow men for you. I told your colonel I wanted to volunteer and he refused. It is very stupid. You are losing a very good soldier."

Ben stared at the German and suddenly laughed. "You are an honest man."

"Of course," the German said.

"You should be killed, of course."

"Those *Lumpen,*" the prisoner said, "think so, too. They say I am a renegade to the German race. What German race? I like excitement. I am an honest man."

"Exactly," Ben said. "I respect you. You should be killed, but I respect you."

"We all take our chances," the German said equably. He looked at his wrist watch. "Please, Herr Hoffman, blow your whistle. The trucks will soon be here for the men."

Men trotted from the forest at the shrill blast. They formed four ranks and waited. Ben looked at the German leader. Branches cracked and motors grumbled in the distance.

"Count them, Herr Hoffman," the German said. "Including myself, there should be ninety prisoners." He unfolded a copy of the Kommando roster. "Is that not correct?"

"Yes," Ben said. He counted the men, pausing before each file.

The trucks rumbled into the clearing. *"Aufsteigen!"* the leader shouted. Men climbed into the trucks, reaching to pull in their companions.

The next day Ben was put on the towers. The gate sergeant walked with him outside the fence. Single strands of barbed wire were strung from spaced wooden uprights. To each pole was nailed a short piece of board pointing into the prison. Tangles of spiked wire ran from board to board. A man climbing the seven-foot fence from inside would fall

on his back. Ben touched a barb gingerly and the rickety fence trembled.

"Some protection," Ben said.

"Hell," the sergeant said, "that fence is just to keep us off their property. We're not even allowed to take a weapon inside there."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. That's the rule. Afraid we'll hurt their feelings, I suppose."

At the corner of the fence reared a twenty-foot tower. "Up you go," the sergeant said, boosting Ben up the rudely nailed ladder. Scrambling through an open trap door, Ben found a carbine thrust into his hands by a man who muttered, "About time," and disappeared through the hole. Ben kicked the trap door shut and stood on the railed platform, watching the sergeant and the guard walking away on the path below. Ben slung the carbine and leaned inside the windowed booth. Hung on a leather strap from the wall was a field phone with a crank. He walked around the platform. He flexed his knees tentatively and the boards beneath him shuddered. Leaning on the railing, he watched the hut city below. He saw the black PW on the back of a man wringing out clothes in the field. Two prisoners were propping up the wooden shield of a hut window. A rank odor rose from a prisoner latrine.

He stood watching the movement of men. Cupping a cigarette in his hand, he stared at the shifting pattern far below. Men moved from hut to hut, leaving groups and forming groups.

The phone rang three times. He answered.

"How you doing?" the phone said. "This is the gate sergeant."

"All right," Ben said.

"Boring, ain't it?" the phone said.

"Nothing but," Ben said.

Ben spent one week guarding work details and the next week standing tower guard. On Kommandos Germans spoke eagerly to him about their wives and children and homes. Politics are senseless, they said, we just want to go home and live like men. They invited Ben into the compound to listen to the record player in their lounge.

"I dream I go home to my wife and our children," a German told Ben. "And I think of bombs, your bombs, that

fall on my city. I don't care what is right and what is wrong. I think of my family and your bombs."

"Families should be safe," Ben said. "German families; English families; French families; Jewish families."

"I dream of your bombs," the prisoner said.

Ben nodded.

Sometimes they shouted up to him when he was on the tower. A prisoner called, "Would you like to see a picture of my *Mutti?*"

Ben leaned over and nodded vigorously. "*Gewiss,*" he said. "Sure."

The German ran into a hut and returned, holding above his head a large crayon drawing of a smiling young matron in a glass frame.

"Pretty," Ben shouted. "Very pretty. She looks very young to be your mother."

The prisoner lowered the picture and looked at it. "My mother?" He laughed suddenly. "You make a joke! My girl friend looks young for my mother! Good joke!" He walked to his hut and did not return.

Ben could not find *Mutti* in the German dictionary. He asked a prisoner. "It is a love word for a girl friend," the German said. "Why? Do you have a German girl friend?"

Prisoners praised Ben's German. "You speak perfectly," they said. "What part of Germany do you come from?" He lost all hesitation in speaking German. The language became more and more poetic to his ear. Prisoners gave him copies of "*Lili Marlene*" and "*Der Blonde Matrose.*"

Early one morning, shaving in the latrine, he heard English words being mangled into Germanic forms. An American soldier was talking to the Viennese orderly.

"Oh," the Viennese said in slow, lilting German. "You speak wonderful German! Do you come from Cologne?"

"Nah," the American said. "I just picked it up. It's easy for me. I'm from Pennsylvania."

"Oh, but it is perfect!" the orderly said. "*Echt Deutsch!*"

Ben cut his chin. Rinsing his razor, he saw his shocked face in the mirror. He smiled. The honeymoon was over.

Days later, he walked across the field to the gate shack. He paused by the side of the shack to knock mud from his shoes. Inside a German was saying in accented English, "The American Army is good, but I do not understand one thing.

Do you trust Jews with you? *Der* Hoffman, he is Jewish, is that not so?"

The gate sergeant said, "I don't know. I suppose so."

"Well?" the German said.

Ben entered and the German sprang to his feet, smiled, and said, *"Guten Tag,* Herr Hoffman!"

Ben stared at the prisoner. The German stood, smiling at him. Finally Ben smiled. *"Guten Tag,"* he said, "Herr —what is your name?"

"Rudolf Schlau, Herr Hoffman," the German said.

"Rudolf Schlau," Ben said. "I will remember your name, Herr Schlau."

After that it was even more gracious and Continental. For every compliment Ben received from the Germans, he composed an even greater compliment for the *Kultur* and efficiency of the Germans. They became a little desperate sometimes, trying to climax Ben's compliments to them.

The commanding officer called Ben from a group of prisoners one afternoon. "You speak German?"

"Yes, sir," Ben said. "It's on my record."

"It's on your record," the colonel said. "Of course. What's your name?"

Ben told him.

A week later Ben was called into headquarters and passed from the sergeant to a lieutenant to a captain who ushered him into the colonel's office.

"Hoffman," the colonel said, "we're opening another branch camp near Charleston. The air base has built a compound. I'm sending an officer and eighteen men guard complement. You go as compound sergeant and interpreter. You will be responsible for work contracts and prisoner discipline. The office here will brief you on forms."

"Sir," Ben said, "I'm a private. I've had no experience. I'd rather not have such responsibility."

"Anything else you have to say?"

"No, sir."

"Get out and start packing. Orders have been cut making you buck sergeant."

Ben packed and visited the compound to say good-by.

"You have treated us well," the German compound leader said. "You understand us. You treat us as gentlemen."

"You *are* gentlemen," Ben said peacefully, "when you have barbed wire around you."

"Herr Hoffman!" the German said. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Ben said, "the games you play are baby's games. You and I are cultured men, superior to the American boors. You and the other guards are Aryans, superior to the greedy Jews. You and my commanding officer are good soldiers, superior to the undisciplined American rabble. This game of division is infantile. But behind barbed wire you are as likable as children in a play pen."

"I have no doubt," the German said, "that what you say has meaning. It is probably only my stupidity that prevents me from understanding a word you are saying. Why should we want to divide Americans? We are prisoners."

"You can't divide Americans," Ben said. "Every American believes himself an individual already. Americans are strong *because* they don't particularly like each other. Our loyalty is to our individualism. Can a German understand that?"

"You mistake us," the German said aggrievedly.

It's true, Ben thought, surprised. Our ideal is the pioneer, the man who is whole and independent, the man who recognizes and solves his problem. The man who bridges the gulf between an ideal and an act. Not the man who goes crazy confusing the two. Being an American has as many definitions as there are Americans.

The German offered his hand. "Herr Hoffman," he said, "despite all, we respect you. You have been fair."

At the truck convoy Ben met the plump German sergeant, Befehl, who would be the German leader of the new compound. Two hundred and fifty prisoners were on the trucks.

"Herr Hoffman," Befehl said. "I am glad to work with you. I have heard of you."

"I hope we have a good camp," Ben said.

Guards rode in the cabs of the six trucks. In the jeep that Ben was driving, the young captain worried, ordering him often to race the length of the convoy. They stopped three times during the hundred-mile trip over rolling South Carolina country. Germans and Americans lined the roadside, relieving themselves into the ditches. An approaching automobile accelerated suddenly and sped past. Ben, waiting in the jeep, saw the woman driver gripping the steering wheel. A child stuck his head from the window and looked back until the car passed from sight behind a hill.

Ten miles from Charleston, military-police jeeps met the

convoy at the air-base entrance. At the periphery of the base, near the hospital, was the barbed-wire area.

The trucks parked by the fence. Men jumped out, pulled barracks bags from the tailgates, and marched through the wire gates.

Ben said, suddenly, to Befehl, "Stop them. I want to speak to them before they move into huts."

Befehl ran ahead. *"Halt!"* The prisoners moved into formation. *"Achtung!"* Ben walked before the men. *"Alles in ordnung,* Herr Hoffman," Befehl said.

Ben faced the prisoners. He spoke slowly in German, turning his head, seeing the faces. "I am your sergeant. You are prisoners, not criminals. Your position is honorable. I do not forget your dignity. You are entitled to respect. We ask you to remember that *we* are entitled to respect. I will use all my authority to protect the dignity of every man, whether German or American.

"I want you to know I am Jewish. If anyone objects, tell me. I will try to have him transferred."

Ben waited, looking at the faces. The prisoners stood at attention, staring at him. The muscles in the back of Ben's neck ached. He stiffened and counted to thirty, waiting.

"All right," he said. "Stand at ease. Kommandos begin the day after tomorrow. Clean and arrange your huts tomorrow and rest. Be sure your huts are clean. The officer and I will inspect them." He turned to Befehl. "Put them into huts by companies."

Befehl saluted. Startled, Ben returned the salute. *"Gut,* Herr Hoffman. We will do well together." The German shouted at the men. They lifted the bulging barracks bags and slung them on their shoulders.

Ben walked from the clearing through the wire gates. Soldiers were climbing the towers. Smoke rose from the detachment mess hall. He took his bags from the truck and carried them into the barracks.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE war has been over for months, Ben thought, and the prison remains. How much service do I need to get out? Over three years in the Army now. A hash mark already.

Ben parked the jeep on the road and scrambled down the embankment to the field. Prisoners were scattered in the rows, picking snap beans from vines, dropping them into bushel baskets.

"Hallo, Herr Hoffman," a German shouted. The prisoners stood erect and waved, smiling.

A prisoner walked through the soft earth between the vines. "Greetings, Herr Hoffman," he said in German. "How are you?"

"Well, thank you. And you?"

"Also, thank you."

Ben looked around. Beyond a wire fence, in the next field, working closely bunched together, were Negroes. They laughed and screamed at each other, syllables rising and falling in strange rhythms. Ben could not understand a word. The Gullah patois, tongue of coastal and island slaves, redolent of Africa and pirate slavers. Black women wore skirts, men's knickers hanging beneath them on crusted bare legs. A fedora sat on a bandanna-wrapped head. A woman waved across the field, black face beaming. She wore an ancient swallowtail coat over her frock. A man wore a torn sweater, black skin shining through a gaping hole. The gang moved steadily down the row of vines. Ben waved vigorously, and the Negroes jabbered and laughed.

"Where is your guard?" Ben said. *"Der Manny?"*

The German smiled and pointed at a clump of trees and thick brush across the fields near a meandering stream.

Ben looked at the prisoner. "I know you, don't I?"

"Oh, yes," the German said. "From Fort Jackson. My

name is Rudi Schlau. We are friends from Fort Jackson from a long time, already."

"Rudi Schlau?" Ben said. "Rudi Schlau? Oh, yes. We met at the gate house. I promised you I would remember. It is a great pleasure to me that you are here with us, Herr Rudolf Schlau."

"I am glad to be here," Schlau said. He pointed suddenly at the clump of trees. A Negro woman walked swiftly from the bushes, waving a small wrapped package. The Negroes in the next field set up a shout and she laughed shrilly, breaking into a run.

"Where is Manny?" Ben said.

"Do not worry, Herr Hoffman," the German said. "He will be here soon."

"Are you the Kommando leader?"

"Yes, Herr Hoffman."

A plump man in a dirty khaki uniform ambled toward them from the brush, nightstick hung from his belt. His hips rolled slightly. He was brushing himself gently with his fingertips. Sweat stains spread from under his arms. Pulling the shirt taut over his breast, he pushed the cloth into his pants. He saw Ben and waved.

"You better get back to your men, Schlau," Ben said.

"*Gewiss,* Herr Hoffman." The German walked back through the vines. Across the wire fence, the black woman joined the group, buttoning her vest across her bosom.

Manny walked up the dirt path beside the fence and smiled gently at Ben. "Hello," he said. "Sorry I wasn't here to welcome you."

"What were you doing?"

"Enjoying myself."

Ben looked across the fence into the distant field. The Negroes were laughing and pointing at them.

"Good Lord!" Ben said. "You didn't lay one of those creatures?"

"Ah, ah," Manny said reproachfully. "They're human beings. Don't talk like that."

"One of those unwashed gabbling creatures?" Ben demanded.

"Why not?" Manny said calmly. "They're women. Don't be narrow-minded." He held his hand before him, turning a heavy amethyst ring to catch the sunlight.

"I know they're human beings," Ben said. "Lousy. Unwashed. Diseased."

Manny leaned against a fence post and smiled gently at Ben. "I caught a prisoner sneaking off with a wench yesterday. He was going to give her a sandwich. That's all it takes."

Ben said, "I could understand a prisoner."

"The girl was nice to me," Manny said, his face glowing with earnestness, "and I appreciate it." He tittered. "She did smell a little."

Ben laughed. "I admire you. Did you give away your lunch?"

"Why, no, Ben," Manny said. "Don't worry. I brought an extra sandwich."

Hoofs pounded in the distance, becoming louder. Ben looked up. In the next field a sweated roan horse cantered along the dirt path by the wire fence. The Negroes bent over the vines along the harrows, picking quickly and absorbedly. The booted rider pulled the horse to a halt and turned it, dancing, toward the field. An aged Negro pulled a cap from his head and trotted through the soft earth to the mounted man.

The stallion backed nervously from the Negro. The old man held the bridle and stroked the horse's nose. The lithe man on the horse shifted on the saddle and spoke, pointing with his crop to the field hands, to the Negro. The old man bobbed his head, put on his cap, and trotted back through a furrow.

The man put his horse into a gallop. The prisoners stood erect in the field, watching the approaching stallion. Manny leaned on a fence post. The man reined up on the path and Ben caught the bridle strap.

"Good mornin'," the man said. "Your man said you'd be around today. You the boss of these boys?" He wiped a hand on his whipcord breeches and reached down to shake Ben's hand.

Ben, looking up, said, "Yes, in a way."

The man dismounted and stood by Ben, slapping dust from his breeches with the crop. "They're good workers. I'd sure like about forty more."

"Everybody would," Ben said. "They're sure popular with farmers."

"All the niggers are gone to Cha'leston," the man said. "These crops need picking."

"The prisoners are all allotted," Ben said. "I wish we could give you more."

The overseer looked at Manny and turned to Ben and said, low, "It would sure be worth something to me."

Ben patted the wet flank of the roan. "Beautiful horse," he said.

"Ride him," the man said eagerly. "He's lovely. Won three ribbons as a gaited horse. Take him down the path."

Muscles trembled under the moist hide. Ben laid his hand flat on the flank, wondering at the nervous energy. "Could I?" he said. "I'm no equestrian wonder."

"Have you ridden?"

"Livery stables, that's all. Not very often."

"Climb on," the man said. "He'll take care of you like a mother."

Ben held the saddle horn. The horse backed, showing his teeth. The man boosted Ben onto the saddle. The stirrups were short. Ben tightened his knees against the horse and gently shook the reins, holding the trailing straps in his right hand.

The roan surged forward, moving into a smooth canter. The dirt path beneath disappeared behind them. Ben held his back stiff, his waist rocking gently in the long strides of the horse. Wind blew through his hair. The horse veered, following the path around the wire fence. The prisoners cheered. He touched the withers with a trailing strap and the horse surged ahead. Ben whooped, his face flushed. The soft turned earth of the furrows flashed by. He pulled on the reins, suddenly frightened that the stallion would step off the path into the soft earth. The horse slowed gently to a walk. Ben bounced in the saddle.

The man walked away from Manny to meet Ben on the path. He held the bridle and looked up at Ben, laughing in the saddle.

"*Der* Buffalo Bill!" shouted a prisoner.

"How about it?" the man said.

"It was wonderful," Ben said. "What a horse!"

"I mean," the man said, "about more prisoners."

Ben turned the reins about the horn and climbed off. Thigh muscles tightened. "I'm sorry," he said. "I can't. They're all allotted. Thanks for the ride."

The prisoners stood in the fields, watching. *"Zur Arbeit!"* Ben shouted. They laughed and bent over the vines.

"I'm sorry," Ben said.

The man swung on the stallion, boots finding the stirrups. "Stop up at the house later for a drink. I'd like to talk with you." He galloped away, turning from the field up the embankment to the road. Ben watched the horse and rider around a bend.

He walked through the soft earth to the prisoners, picking beans from the vines, throwing them into the baskets. He squatted on his heels and reached into the vines. Dirt was kicked over his shoes. He looked up.

A prisoner stood in the furrow, arms folded. *"So demokratisch bist du,* Ben."

Ben sat back in the dirt. "Hello, Tierdenken. *Ja, ich bin Ben der Demokrat.* How's your head?"

The German touched a bandage taped on a shaven square of scalp. "Thank you, Ben, all right. Your club is not democratic."

"What club is?" Ben said, throwing a bean pod up into the German's face. Tierdenken ducked and laughed.

Ben walked back to the embankment and scrambled up to the jeep. He waved at the prisoners and drove away. He turned into the driveway to the big house, rolling slowly in the shade of the overhead canopy of leaves, watching the lacy sun patterns bright on the dark oiled road. He parked and climbed the porch.

He dropped the iron ring against the knocker plate and the door opened. A young red-haired girl said, "Come in, Sergeant. Father was expecting you."

Her dress rustled in the dimness. Ben followed her into the parlor. Shades were drawn over the window.

The man in the riding breeches rose from a high-backed chair with lion-head arms. "Sergeant, I'm glad you stopped in."

"You wanted to see me?" Ben said.

"What are you drinking?" The man motioned the girl toward a great hand-carved cabinet. She took a key from her pocket and opened the doors. Bottles, stamped and pinched and wicker-woven, stood in rows.

"Whisky's all right, Mr. Laird," Ben said.

"This is my daughter," the man said. "Sergeant—Hoffman, isn't it?—my daughter Virginia."

"Glad to know you, Miss Laird," Ben said. The girl smiled.

"Two bourbons and water, Ginny," her father said.

The girl left the room. "Hot day," the man said.

"Sure is," Ben said. "For April."

The man smiled. "It makes crops."

The girl came into the shaded room, cubes of ice tinkling in two tall etched glasses. She poured a jigger of bourbon into each glass, stirred with a long-handled spoon and handed a glass to her father and a glass to Ben.

"Your health," the man said.

"And yours," Ben said, drinking.

"Sergeant," the man said, "I need more men. This is an early crop and I want to catch the market. Get more men for me and I'll pay you for your trouble."

"Mr. Laird, we have only two hundred and fifty men. We're servicing many plantations around here. Agriculture details have high priority and we want to be fair. You already have twenty men."

The young girl pulled up a window shade and a shaft of sunlight struck into the cool room.

"It's worth fifty dollars to me," the man said.

"See my commanding officer," Ben said. "He's responsible for the disposition of prisoners."

"I've talked to him," the man said. "He told me you decide where prisoners go. He says you're a good man, Sergeant."

The young girl was shading her eyes against the sun, looking through the window.

"Thanks," Ben said.

The girl turned from the window. "Please pardon me," she said.

Her father said, "Of course, Ginny."

"Mr. Hoffman," she said, "I've enjoyed meeting you. I hope you'll stop in again."

Ben rose. "Thank you," he said. She left the room.

"Send me twenty more men tomorrow," the man said, "and I'll give you the cash now."

"Don't embarrass me, Mr. Laird," Ben said. "I appreciate your problem and I'll certainly send more men if I can find a way to do it fairly."

"Your word's enough for me," the man said. He stood and reached into the tight pocket of his breeches.

Ben walked to the window. "Don't, Mr. Laird. Those men are not on the market."

"Just for your trouble," the man said.

Through the window Ben saw Virginia, red hair tossing, walking on the dark oiled driveway, smiling up at the tall man beside her. She touched his arm. They walked into a patch of sunlight. The man was Schlau. Virginia opened the barn door and they entered the building. The open door hung crookedly.

"Your daughter is an attractive young lady," Ben said.

"Thank you," the man said.

"She's extraordinarily hospitable," Ben said. "What is that prisoner doing here?"

Mr. Laird sat back in the chair. "One of them is making a cedar chest for Virginia. He's quite a carpenter. She's very pleased. He works in the barn workshop for a couple of hours in the afternoon."

Ben finished the drink. "They're sent here to pick crops."

The man laughed. "After all, Sergeant, I'm paying for the man. You bill me every month."

"One dollar and sixty cents," Ben said. "Per man per day. Eighty cents in PX coupons to the prisoner. Eighty cents to the government for board and keep. They're not cheap labor to make chests for your daughter, Mr. Laird."

"Relax, Sergeant," the man said. "Let me refill your glass. You take your job too seriously."

"Cedar chests don't have high priority," Ben said. "And women are not supposed to be in close contact with prisoners. You have the contract. Read it."

The man struck his empty glass against the carved-lion arm. "What exactly do you mean, 'close contact'?" he said angrily.

"Mr. Laird," Ben said, walking to the sideboard and putting his glass down, "get that prisoner back in the field. Out of that barn." His voice thickened. "Prisoners are neither pets nor commodities. They're men locked up because of war. They're supposed to work to get the war over so they can go home. And I can go home."

The man rose, controlling himself. "No hard feelings, Sergeant?" he said carefully. "I want to get that food out to market."

"No hard feelings," Ben said. "These men will come out

as long as your crops need picking. All the planters are strapped for labor. All of them."

Ben walked to the door. "All right, Sergeant," the man said. "You're doing your job."

"Good-by, Mr. Laird. Thanks for the drink."

CHAPTER SIX

THE screen door slammed behind Ben. The barracks room was gray with evening. Dust filmed on the windows. Ben unbuttoned his shirt and sat on the edge of the bunk. He sang, his voice mellow in the long dark room. Dropping one shoe to the floor, he pulled at the sweated sock.

In the dusk a squat figure sat on the bunk by the wall, unmoving, staring at the floor.

"What's the matter, Irving?"

Irving lifted his head. His face was heavy, with a broken nose. "What the hell's it to you?" he said.

"Fair enough," Ben said. Shifting on the dusty brown bunk, he sang, "None but the lonely heart—"

"That son of a bitch!" Irving said. "Why's he put me on duty again? Every goddam day! He promises me a day off, and I'm still on!"

Ben opened the footlocker. "Irving, I told you I checked with the first sergeant. He's shorthanded. He's not picking on you."

"Always a story!" Irving said.

Ben shrugged and stood in his underwear, cooling off a moment.

Irving came and sat on his bunk. "Ben," he said, holding out a letter, "I got some mail today. Will you read it to me?"

Ben pulled his brown oxfords from under the bed. "I'll read it to you," he said, "if you tell me one thing. How come a Jew can't read?"

"I can read." In the soft light the broken nose wavered. "And I can write. I just can't do them so good."

"What can you do if you can't read or write?"

"Don't tell me no stories. You gonna read the letter for me or not?"

"Give it to me." He sat beside Irving. "From your cousin Minna. As usual."

Irving's face softened. "What's she say?"

" 'Dear Irving, we thank God you are well and to get your letters. We are well except Rachel she has measles this is the second time.' "

"Who's Rachel?" Ben said.

"The baby."

"How old is she?"

"Nine, I guess."

" 'Your father thank God is well and makes a living. He's got a new job making costumes for plays. The children give him trouble, the oldest girl is married now a month and already you can see why.' "

"Your father's children?" Ben said. "Something new. I didn't know you had brothers or sisters."

"I don't," Irving said. "He had them by my stepmother."

"They're half-brothers and sisters."

"*He's* all right." Irving rubbed the blanket. "It's that bitch. Couldn't stay in the damn room with her. When hers came, I left."

"How old were you?"

"Twelve, I guess."

"What'd you do?"

"Stayed with Minna, some. She has three kids and only two rooms in a tenement like my old man. I slept around. I made out."

Ben finished the letter and returned it. "Thanks, Ben," Irving said, folding the paper carefully. "I'll do something for you some day."

"Sure you will." Ben took his toilet kit from the footlocker.

Irving rubbed his broken nose and smiled. He walked to the dusty window. "That son of a bitch."

Ben threw a towel on his shoulder. "Who?"

"That first sergeant! He promised me—"

"Shut up," Ben said. "Get dressed and come to town with me. We'll have a couple of beers."

Irving stared through the window. Across the lawn in the dusk was the orderly room.

"Come on," Ben said.

Irving turned from the window and stared at Ben. "I told you," he said quietly, "I'm on duty again."

"Oh," Ben said. "Want anything from town?"

"No," Irving said.

Ben bathed and dressed. He walked along the barbed-wire fence in the dusk. A small dog, barking shrilly, darted from the shadow of the prisoner mess hall. Ben knelt and

put his hand carefully through the spiked wire to stroke the puppy.

"Hello, Mutti." The pup wriggled, pressing against the wire. He yelped, suddenly, and backed from the sharp points.

"Agh," Ben said. He pulled his hand through the barbs and rose. The pup followed him along the fence, keeping back from the wire. He barked forlornly after Ben from the corner of the fence.

Ben boarded the bus at the gate.

On Calhoun Street the driver braked to a stop and switched off the motor. Soldiers rose, crowding in the aisle. Ben stepped down, stood by the curb, and lit a cigarette. Now what? he thought.

Barefoot Negro boys, wooden boxes swinging from their necks, rushed at him. "Shine, Boss!"

"Sorry, boys," he said, smiling. On Meeting Street, he walked toward the U.S.O. The children streamed after him. "Come on, Boss! Shine!" A Negro boy danced in front of him, walking backwards.

Ben stood still and narrowed his eyes. He let the smile die and his face grow heavy and angry. "Get!" he said.

The Negroes stopped and looked at him. Suddenly they ran off, laughing.

In the U.S.O. lounge he sat in an overstuffed chair, reading dog-eared magazines. A young girl approached and said with a bright smile, "Dance, soldier?"

"Thank you," Ben said. "No." He walked from the building into the street. The sidewalks were narrow. Women flounced by, hanging on the arms of soldiers and sailors. A Negro man, plastic work helmet cocked on his head, brushed past Ben. In an alleyway three merchant mariners in rumpled whites with no insignia were talking earnestly to a fat woman who was shaking her head.

Ben roamed the streets. In the twilight he saw high balconies, the railings arabesques of thin, airy ironwork. The houses were old, fixed by history, weathered by time. He passed the neon-lit theaters and restaurants of King Street, saluting officers and their women. A painted girl with young unformed breasts smiled at him and he smiled back and walked on.

He drank a root beer in a drugstore and then sat on a bench in Marion Square. A man in shirt sleeves asked him

for a cigarette. A lean shanked dog ran along the curb. Ben whistled to him and the dog trotted over to be patted.

In a hotel lobby Ben looked up the name in the directory. He dialed the number.

"Hello, Anne?" he said. "This is Ben Hoffman. From the prisoner-of-war camp."

"Well," the phone said, "this is a surprise."

"I called," Ben said, "to find out if your finger is all right."

"Of course, Ben. I put some iodine on it and forgot about it. Thanks for being so concerned."

"You were the first woman the puppy ever saw. You excited him."

The phone laughed. "Is that a compliment?"

"I can appreciate the way the dog felt."

"Well," the phone said and was silent. "I hope you didn't punish the puppy, Ben."

"No," he said, "I didn't. As a matter of fact, I'm grateful to him."

"Why?"

"He gave me an excuse to call you. Listen, Anne, the company is giving a party in its day room Friday night. Fried chicken, kegs of beer—the works. Would you like to come?"

"Sounds like fun," the phone said. "This Friday night? That's short notice."

"I think you'd enjoy it," Ben said.

"I don't know," the phone said. "I'd like to go with you, honestly, Ben, but on such short notice—"

"If you don't want to come," Ben said, "don't come."

The phone laughed. "Don't be arrogant, Ben. I'm not a prisoner."

"I don't want to force you to do anything."

"Would you like me to come?"

Ben looked at the telephone in amazement. He said, low-voiced, "Very much."

"All right, Ben. What time shall I be ready?"

"Wonderful!" Ben said. "I'll pick you up at 8:30. Agreed?"

"Do you know the way here, Ben? It's way out in the country."

"You give me the directions, Anne. I'll be there."

"Maybe you better meet me in town. My folks come in

Friday evenings. Pick me up at my girl friend's home." She gave the address.

"All right, Anne. See you there at 8:30 then. Friday night."

"I'll be ready. Till then."

"Good-by," Ben said. Staying in an army camp, he thought, you forget. You have to tell a woman you want her. She knows it, but you have to tell her.

He went into a liquor store. All the whisky was behind the counter and the rest of the store was bare. Ben stood in line behind a man in paint-stained dungarees.

A white-haired man asked Ben for his order.

"A pint of Carstairs, please," Ben said.

The old man put a bottle on the counter and bent to pull a paper bag from a bottom shelf.

"That's not Carstairs," Ben said.

The old man placed his hands flat on the counter. "Son," he said, "I'm glad I got whisky to give you. You want it?"

"Yes," Ben said. He put a five-dollar bill in the man's hand. The clerk put the bill in his pocket and gave Ben a quarter.

"But—" Ben said.

"Next!" the old man said.

"Thanks," Ben said.

He folded the bag neatly across the top and waited at Marion Square for the bus.

Raffia was in charge of quarters. He sat alone in the office, writing a letter under the light of the desk lamp. "Hello, Ben," he said. "You're back early. The captain's wife called. She said to tell you they're leaving tomorrow evening. She sends you her regards."

"Thanks," Ben said.

"She said her *best* regards. You ain't doin' *that* for the captain, too, are you?"

"There's nothing I wouldn't do for the captain," Ben said.

"What you got in the bag?"

"Whisky. Get a glass from the kitchen and I'll give you some. Then I'm going into my office and don't bother me."

Raffia returned with a glass and watched Ben pour the whisky. He drank deeply and said, "Thanks, Ben."

"Drinking on duty," Ben said.

Raffia smiled secretively. "I'll pay you back, Ben. Something you'll like, *compa'*."

Ben stepped around the screen into his office and turned on the desk lamp. A newspaper was spread on the card table. He looked absently at the crossword puzzle. Walther Urleid worked all week on the Sunday puzzle, discarding it when the new one arrived. Ben folded the paper and put it in the desk tray marked "work."

He took a tumbler from the drawer and filled it brimming with whisky. He took a library book from the drawer. *Dead Souls,* by Gogol. He read and drank, refilling the glass.

He read for an hour, finishing the book. *Dead Souls,* he thought, it's a comedy. Gogol is supposed to be heavy tragedy, isn't he? Ben's eyelids were heavy. He closed the book, glimpsing the library card. "*Mirabile dictu,*" the lady librarian had said, "you read more books than all the rest of the camp." He reached over and took Walther's dictionary from the card table. "*Mirabile dictu:* wonderful to relate." That's nice. *Mirabile dictu.* He rose heavily and stumbled through the dark into the kitchen and threw the empty bottle into the trash can.

He let himself out the kitchen door, closing it carefully until the lock clicked.

In the dark barracks he undressed slowly, folding his shirt and pants and placing them on the floor. On the bunk he fell asleep, one foot on the floor.

He awoke slowly. Someone was shaking him. "What?" Ben said. "Who is it?"

From the blackness a hoarse whisper came. "It's me. Raffia. Come over to the office."

Ben stood up and grasped, sleepily, the wooden frame of the cot. Bending low to feel the footlocker, he stepped into the aisle.

"I'll be waiting in the office," Raffia said.

The barracks were black. Ben blinked, his eyes hardly open. He stumbled down the steps and ran along the slats to the latrine.

Later, he crossed the grass to the orderly room. The screen door slammed behind him. Raffia sat at the desk. In the glow of the desk lamp, a clock read 4:32.

"All right," Ben said. "What's wrong?"

"Nothin'!" Raffia said. "I said I had a surprise for you."

He led Ben through the dark mess hall into the kitchen. The overhead light was on. A pot simmered on the stove. Raffia lifted the lid with a flourish and steam leaped into the air, pungent with garlic and spice.

"Chicken cacciatore!" Raffia said.

Ben looked into the pot. Great red bubbles formed and broke, shreds of peppers and bits of meat surging up in the thick molten tomato sauce. His stomach heaved.

"A treat, huh?" Raffia said. He pulled down a long loaf of crisp Italian bread and broke it in half.

"A treat?" Ben said. "Eat that greasy sauce in the middle of the night?"

"Sure!"

"I guess it is, at that," Ben said. "How about the mess sergeant?"

"He gave me the keys. I have to leave a potful for him." Raffia ladled out two soup bowls and put them on the table. He gave Ben half the loaf.

Ben ate. The whisky had made him hungry. Raffia put his face close to the bowl and made noises. Neither spoke.

Raffia finished two bowls full. He sat, his smeared face beaming, watching Ben eat. "I been collecting this stuff in town for a week, Ben," he said.

"Raffia," Ben said, swallowing a piece of bread sopped in the sauce, "let me chip in for the food."

"Nah!" Raffia said. "You're my guest!"

They washed the bowls and put away the sauce.

"Thanks," Ben said.

"Did I tell you?" Raffia said. "We got chippies coming to the party. The first sergeant sent an invitation to the WAC's."

"Great," Ben said. "We'll have to beat them off with clubs."

Raffia hitched up his pants. "I've got mine," he said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BEN looked up from his desk at the knock on the screen. The fat German camp sergeant stood there, smiling uneasily.

"Come in, Befehl," Ben said. "Sit down."

Befehl spoke to the clerk, seated at the card table. "Urleid," he said in German, "I want to see Herr Hoffman alone."

Walther stood up and looked at Ben, waiting. "Please, Herr Hoffman," Befehl said.

"Go ahead, Walther," Ben said. "Get a cup of coffee in the kitchen."

"O.K., Ben," the clerk said, and left the room.

The camp sergeant pulled a chair close to the desk and sat down. "Herr Hoffman," he said, leaning forward, "I have been delegated to request from you that the prisoners be given a holiday tomorrow."

"A holiday!" Ben said. "Why a holiday?"

Befehl looked at the floor. "Tomorrow is a German national holiday."

"What holiday?" Ben said.

"Herr Hoffman," Befehl said. "You understand, my job is a difficult one. Life is difficult in a prison. The young ones feel strongly about certain things. I think that perhaps a gesture on your part would save us trouble. I do not speak for myself in asking this holiday from work."

"What holiday?" Ben said.

"They want only to hold a party," Befehl said. "And they will go back to work willingly the next day. They say they will not report for work tomorrow."

"What holiday?" Ben said.

Befehl sighed and looked again at the floor. He said nothing.

"I know what holiday tomorrow is," Ben said. "Hitler's birthday."

"A loud minority are fanatics," Befehl said. "I will keep the celebration quiet. A poem, perhaps, to commemorate our dead."

"Befehl," Ben said quietly, "you make me tired. In the first place, I have no authority to grant you a holiday. In the second place, do you think that because we are decent we are weak? Do you think we are decent to you because we are afraid of you?"

"No, Herr Hoffman," Befehl said. "You are fair. We respect that the Americans are fair."

"Do *you* want to celebrate Hitler's birthday?"

"No." Befehl leaned forward and spoke earnestly. "The older ones are sensible. We have lost the war. We have done many wrong things. We want to go home again, to our families again, and to forget this drunkenness."

"The answer is no," Ben said. "Why do you insult me by asking?"

"The young ones are rabid," Befehl said. "They are without cure. There will be much trouble."

"Americans can give trouble, too, Befehl."

"Herr Hoffman, I cannot control the young ones."

Ben said, "Befehl, you are the highest-ranking German in this compound. You are a strong leader. If you cannot control your young Nazis, it is because you are afraid or because you agree with them. Which is it?"

"You do not know the young ones, Herr Hoffman."

Ben was silent. Befehl offered him a cigarette. *"Danke,"* Ben said, taking it absently.

He smoked and rose and walked to the window. He turned and said to Befehl, "I can do only one thing. I am not proud of this thing. I am not sure it is right. You understand, Befehl, that it is a Nazi idea to punish all for the crimes of a few, but you must restrain your crazy Germans. That is your responsibility, not mine. My responsibility is to run a disciplined camp."

"You do not know the young ones," Befehl said gravely.

"You wait here," Ben said. He walked from the office into the captain's empty office. They think I am a coward, he thought, because I am not a tough soldier. Because I am friendly. Because they call me by my first name. They think I'm a prattling fool, a weak coward who bows to the noble German warrior. The idealist and the Nazi. What the hell is the answer?

He sat in the captain's chair and dialed the captain's home.

"Hello," he said into the telephone. "Captain? This is Hoffman. Listen, Befehl is here and he says the prisoners will refuse to work tomorrow because it's Hitler's birthday." He listened. "No, not all of them. Some of them. What do you want to do?" He listened again. "Yes, Captain, I do have an idea. I want you to order me to take all the food out of the compound kitchen and to order a shakedown of the compound. I want you to order me to remove all food from the huts and the canteen." Ben listened. "Sure, I need your order. You're the officer." He laughed. "O.K., Captain. Sorry I bothered you. Give my regards to your wife. Enjoy your leave."

Ben cradled the telephone and walked into the orderly room. "Corporal," he said to the company clerk, "get all the men out of the barracks and in formation. Tell them to bring their clubs. Have three men drive the trucks into the compound, backed up against the prisoner mess loading platform."

Crawford sat at the first-sergeant's desk. "Hoffman," he said, "if you want men, you ask me. You goddam draftees are a pain in the ass. I'm the first sergeant and you get your men from me, or you don't get them."

"Hell," Ben said. "You here? I thought you were out lapping up beer at the Non-Com Club. You heard what I told the corporal. Those are captain's orders, Sergeant Crawford. Don't give me any more trouble. I got enough."

"Six stripes in two years," Crawford said. "What were you before you were drafted, a clothing salesman?"

"Will you get the men out, Crawford?"

"Go ahead, Corporal," the gray-haired first sergeant said. "Get the men out for Master Sergeant Hoffman."

"Thanks," Ben said. "Incidentally, Sergeant Crawford, that Irving Kind is building up a case again. He claims he's drawing more duty than any other man. I told him I'd see you about it. Why don't you talk to him? You know he's off his nut a little. Explain to him you're short-handed. He'll feel better."

"That gold brick!" Crawford said. "You run your job, Hoffman. I spent twenty years learning mine."

Ben shook his head and walked back to his office. Befehl sat in the chair, comfortably, smoking a cigarette.

Ben sat at his desk and looked steadily at the German camp sergeant. A whistle blew outside. Befehl shifted in the chair and crossed his legs. Ben said nothing. Outside in the yard the truck motors whirred and roared. The trucks rumbled past the windows, cinders grating under the tires.

The company clerk was shouting outside. Ben heard his name called. "Wait, Befehl," he said again.

He went out the side door and walked on the boardwalk to the front of the building. Eleven men were standing in a rough line, dangling night sticks from their hands by leather thongs. The company clerk stood before the line.

"O.K., Ben," he said. "Here they are."

"Thanks, Corporal," Ben said.

"What the hell's up?" one of the men said.

"Listen," Ben said to the men. "I want you to go to the gate and wait there. I'm going to call a formation of the prisoners. There may be some trouble. Don't take any lip. Use the clubs if you have to. Tennyson, you and Manny go to the prisoner kitchen and stay there if I call. The rest of you men go through every hut in the compound. Confiscate all contraband. Anything you *think* is contraband is contraband. I want to see everything you take out of the huts. Do not take personal possessions. Examine stoves, floors and closets. Look under beds. I want every bit of juice they've got in there. You know where they hide it. Every crock, jug and bottle they made that kickapoo juice in. Take anything that will ferment out of the huts. Potatoes, raisins, oranges, dried fruit, everything. I *may* want all foodstuffs out, too. All chocolate bars, candy, crackers and such. I'll tell you if I want them out. Again I'll tell you: *Do not take any personal possessions.* Pile all the contraband in front of me. I'll be in front of the formation. Any questions?"

Manny laughed. "Ben, why don't you let them drink that poison? What do you care?"

"I'm just mean," Ben said. "You men get over by the gate and come in when I call."

They walked across the road to the padlocked wire fence.

Ben returned to the office. "Let's go, Befehl. Call formation."

The portly German and Ben waited at the gate for the sergeant of the guard to unlock the chain.

They walked through the gate toward the clearing. Befehl

looked curiously at the men grouped by the fence, clubs hanging from their hands. Two of the men were having a mock duel, feinting and clashing the clubs.

"Blow your whistle," Ben said.

The fat German blew the whistle fiercely. Men came tumbling out of the huts, running down the company streets toward the clearing before the mess hall. They lined up excitedly, extending their arms to establish the neat military interval.

"Still stand!" Befehl shouted.

The formation stood at attention.

"Sergeant Hoffman will speak to you!" Befehl shouted.

Ben stood quietly, looking at the men, rigid in block formation.

"Gentlemen," he said loudly in German, "tomorrow is Hitler's birthday. Hitler is dead. Many of you respect him. That is your business." I talk like a child, he thought. Maybe if I spoke a more complex German, it would be better. "Many of you, I am told, will not go to work tomorrow in honor of Hitler's birthday. That is my business. If you refuse to go to work, it is mutiny. If you tell me that you will not go to work tomorrow, I will believe you. I have trucks here ready to take all foodstuffs from the kitchen. We will take the pots in which your supper is cooking off the stoves. We will take flour, potatoes, meats—everything from your storerooms. There will be no food in the compound until the mutiny is over. You are not criminals. You are honorable soldiers. If you will tell me that you refuse to work tomorrow, I will believe you. I will take every mouthful of food out of the camp."

The men shifted in ranks and exclaimed, looking at each other.

"Still stand!" Befehl shouted angrily.

"All men who intend to celebrate Hitler's birthday tomorrow by not working will step forward one pace," Ben said.

A young blond soldier promptly stepped forward. In the second rank another prisoner stepped forward. Two more men stepped out of rank. Ben waited.

No more men stepped forward.

A man in ranks reached out and grabbed the arm of the first blond prisoner and pulled him back into the line. Ben raised his hand to count. The lone prisoners out of forma-

tion looked behind them uncomfortably and stepped back quickly. The formation was whole again.

"All right," Ben said. "There will be no mutiny and there will be no removal of food. I am glad. I would be ashamed to take food away from hungry men. You will remain in formation, at ease, talk if you want to. We are going to have an inspection of huts to remove all contraband. This includes, of course, that poison *Schnaps* you make."

The formation groaned. "Join us in a drink, Herr Hoffman," a voice shouted.

"No, thanks," Ben said. "I am not a brave man."

Men laughed in the formation.

Ben waved to the gate. The American soliders walked in small groups, talking and smoking. Ben waved his hand in a circle and pointed dramatically down the company street. The Americans laughed and broke into a run. "War is terrible!" a German shouted in broken English.

Ben grinned. "Keep them amused, Befehl," he said. "Sing them a song or something." He walked from the formation into the mess hall. No one was in the kitchen. He lifted the lid from a huge pot and smelled the fragrant steam. "Beef stew," he said. He went to the door and called to Befehl, "Send the cooks in to take care of supper!"

Befehl shouted. Two men ran into the kitchen. They put on the dirty white aprons lying on the meat block. "Herr Hoffman," one said accusingly, "you wouldn't take away our food. That's against the Geneva Convention."

Ben washed an apple and bit into it. "So is mutiny," he said.

"Da hast du recht," the prisoner said and began to slice bread on the block. "It is true."

Ben sat and talked with the cooks, watching them move skillfully and unhurriedly about the kitchen. One man filled a scuttle of coal and carried it to the black stove. He opened the cast-iron door and spread the coal evenly over the red-glowing bed. The kitchen was warm and smelled of spices. Ben relaxed on a wooden bench, listening to the slow familiar cadence of the cooks' conversation. German is pleasant, he thought, *die Muttersprache.* The slow drawls, the soft sibilances, melodic and rhythmic. Why do people think it harsh? And Viennese German is pure music. One of these cooks is from Baden. I recognize the accent, he thought proudly.

"Ho, Ben!" He woke from revery. He went outside and the strong sun made him blink as he walked to the front of the formation.

The guards stood by a line of receptacles. A miscellaneous pile was heaped at the end. Ben walked down the line. An earthenware jug with a wet piece of cloth tied with a string around the mouth. A large pickle jar full of yellow liquid swimming with fat swollen raisins. A metal bucket covered by a board. Ben lifted the board. Apple slices floated on scummy fluid, a dead fly rocked gently on the surface. Champagne bubbles leaped from the bucket and a sharp acrid scent cut the air. "Woof!" Ben said, and laid the board back. He picked up a mason jar and unscrewed the lid. A rotten potato stench rose from the jar. He spilled the liquid on the ground.

The prisoners groaned. "Load it on the truck, boys," Ben said, "and dump it in the trash." He stood by the pile of objects. Officers' caps, homemade knives with adhesive tape handles. A military police night stick jutted from the pile. "Take the weapons out and keep them," Ben said to Tennyson. "Give the rest of the things back."

Tennyson unbuttoned his shirt pocket. "Ben," he said, "I found this in a trunk." He gave Ben a bulky square.

Ben unfolded thin tissue paper carefully folded and refolded into a compact package. The tissue stretched out into a square yard of design. Ben looked curiously at the tracery. Drawn in meticulous anatomical detail were countless men and women in an infinity of sexual connections, some figures engaged simultaneously with three other figures. Flesh was mathematically wedded to flesh.

Ben hung the large tissue before the men in formation. "Whose is this?" he said.

A swarthy dark-haired youth stepped forward, flushing. "Mine, Herr Hoffman."

"What is it?" Ben said.

"A drawing of a French tapestry. I bought it from a Frenchman."

"Can I have it?" Ben said.

"No, sir."

"For a pack of cigarettes?"

"No, sir."

Two prisoners edged forward from the line to look closely

at the drawing. Ben held it forward and the prisoners shook their heads in amazement.

The swarthy young prisoner looked at the ground, his face red.

"Befehl," Ben said, "look at this. Is it contraband?"

The camp sergeant motioned the prisoners back into formation and lifted the tissue to inspect it. He studied it carefully.

"Herr Hoffman," he said. "Do you want this?"

"Yes," Ben said.

The camp sergeant chuckled. "Herr Hoffman, my opinion is that you do not need it."

Ben folded the tissue carefully and handed the compact package to the swarthy prisoner. The man took the paper, saluted, and returned to ranks.

"Prison's a mess," Ben said.

"Unbelievable," Befehl said.

"Well," Ben said. "Dismiss the men. *Mahlzeit.* Good appetite."

"*Mahlzeit,*" the German camp sergeant said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE noon sun was glaring. Whistling, Ben walked along the boardwalk. At the street another boardwalk connected the gate hut and the officers' hut. Ben stood and watched men behind the barbed wire kick a soccer ball. Leaping into the air, a lean-bodied prisoner snapped his head against the leather. The ball shot against a building and bounced high into the air. Another prisoner leaped.

"Hello, Sahj'nt Hoffman."

Ben turned. "Hello, Major," he said. Tilted back against the wall in an old kitchen chair, Major Krugman sat under the jutting edge of the roof. His face was florid and cheerful. His great stomach rested comfortably in folds on his lap. He pointed at the fence with his pipe. "Those boys sho' like that sport, don't they?"

"They sure do," Ben said, walking over and squatting on his heels beside the old officer under the wooden shade. "How do you like it here, Major?"

"Why, I kinda like it, son. I'm German myself, you know."

"Well, you don't have to worry too much. The captain will be back from leave in two weeks and you can go back to Columbia again and leave us sweating it out here."

"Why, son, you got Cha'leston here. Don't you like it?"

"Sure," Ben said. "Me and a million defense workers and two million other soldiers and sailors. They got everything but room in Charleston."

The major laughed. He said, puffing, "Columbia isn't much better, son."

Ben shifted on his heels and took a handkerchief from his pocket. He wiped his brow and looked at the linen. Soot. He looked up at the mess-hall chimney.

"Yessir," the old man said, leaning his head against the wall. "I'm German myself and I know how to handle these

men. My father settled in Mississippi from Hamburg in 1884. They understand the rod. You got to be strict. You got to punish them. They despise softness."

Ben wiped his face again.

"Son," the old man said, "what's the matter with you? You sweatin' like a nigger at election."

Ben tucked the linen into his hip pocket. "A nigger at election?" He laughed. "That's sure ugly, Major."

The old man dropped the front legs of the chair into the dirt. "Hoffman," he said, "I know you're a Yankee. Don't start anything. Don't tell me I hate niggers."

Ben said, "I'm not telling you anything, sir."

The old officer said loudly, "I don't hate niggers and they know it. They have no better friend than me. Niggers have always worked for me and liked me. They know their place and I know mine, Sahj'nt!"

"Yes, sir," Ben said.

"Nothing personal, son." The old major tilted back in the chair. "It's just the way you say 'nigger.' It's nasty. You callin' names when you say it. A nigger is a nigger and that's why *we* say nigger. We not callin' anybody no names!"

"I know," Ben said, standing and rubbing the arch of his back.

Behind the officers' hut the telephone rang in the orderly room. Major Krugman sucked noisily on the cold pipe and watched the prisoners behind the wire across the road. Ben looked at the major and scratched his chest idly. How did this one qualify for prisoner-of-war duty—overage, psychoneurosis or bad health? The fat old man crossed his legs at the ankles and rested his hands on the comfortable stomach. He turned his head, surveying his domain, and sucked in his cheeks portentously at a stray thought. Probably age, Ben thought; he's too serene to be neurotic. Maybe it takes a neurotic to be serene. God's in His heaven, all's right with the world. At that the old man's got a point. How do I know what they mean when they say nigger? Some of these people get pure affection in their voices when they say nigger. And these black folk on the islands hereabouts, born and raised and never leaving the islands in their whole lives, working in gangs in the fields, cawing like blackbirds, jabbering and screaming in Geechee talk, not a word intelligible, to me anyhow, and then skittering away when I stop

to talk to them. What's the word for those creatures, bred for field work, breeding for field work, born and living and dying within five square miles and never wondering whether the world is any larger? And me renting the prisoners out to those plantation owners and then explaining to the prisoners that the Negroes were the way they were because they had been treated so and not born so. That it is not the Negroes who lose human dignity. And who made them the way they are, the prisoners ask. This old fat gentleman, courteous and benevolent, made them so. And who made him so? Keep it up, boy, you're doing good. Conditions made him so. It's nobody's fault, is it? It's never anybody's fault, is it? Why am I, kind soul that I am, warden of men locked behind a wire fence to practice their human dignity? I'm fighting evil. I'm the warden of evil. If anybody is going to survive, Major, it's going to be you and me, ain't it?

"Son," the major smiled, "you're a mighty serious boy, aren't you? You look right now like a puppy dog making peach pits!"

"I just learned something," Ben said, laughing. "It's a world of desperadoes. Every man a desperado. And I'm a bigger desperado than you are, Major!"

The fat old man leaned forward and rested the front chair legs on the ground. He looked at Ben and he belched softly. Whisky was delicate in the air. "Son," he said mildly, "you got to go some to be a bigger one than me."

"Ben! Yo, Ben!"

Ben stepped onto the boardwalk. The company clerk stood at the top of the steps, holding the screen door open. He beckoned. "You're wanted on the phone, Ben. Officers' mess. The mess officer is blowing his stack about something!"

Seated at the company clerk's desk, Ben spoke into the black phone. "Sergeant Hoffman," he said. He waved to the company clerk to place a pencil and pad before him.

"Sergeant!" the voice said tinnily. "I just walked into my walk-in refrigerator to inspect some meat and I caught one of your prisoners screwing a girl!"

Ben took his ear away from the receiver. "In a refrigerator?" he said.

"In the walk-in box! Screwing the cashier!"

Ben shook his head. "In a refrigerator."

"What the hell ails you! I want that man court-martialed!

I have a pistol on him now and I'll shoot the son of a bitch as soon as look at him!"

Ben said, "Was she willing?"

"What's that have to do with it?"

"Is it rape?"

"Hell, no. The bitch says she loves him."

"You want me to court-martial a man for loving up a girl?"

"He's a German prisoner!"

"Forget it, Captain. Fire that girl."

"Sergeant whatever-the-hell-your-name-is, *this is an order!* I want that man court-martialed!"

"Captain I-know-what-your-name-is, I won't." Ben shifted the receiver to the other ear. "*You* can prefer charges, if you want."

"I will! Let me talk to your C.O."

Ben reached for the pencil. He drew a picture on the pad and signed his name. "Captain," he said, "on that work agreement you signed, you specified that no women would be on premises when prisoners were working."

"How in the hell do you run a restaurant without women?"

"Your problem, Captain. I have your signed agreement which I will produce at any charge you press against that prisoner."

The voice was cold and slow. "Sergeant, are you threatening me?"

"Captain, it's not the man's fault. It's mine for letting them work there. It's yours for putting women near those men. And if it's the girl I think it is, it's nature's fault. Give me the man's name, Captain; I'll have him dig a sump hole. All right?"

"Sergeant, I want your name and serial number. No enlisted man talks to me like that."

"Benjamin Hoffman, 32750318. Captain. And tell the Kommando leader to call his men together. I'm calling every man off your job immediately for violation of contract. Why, I could be court-martialed, myself, for sending prisoners out to work with women on the premises! Part of my job, Captain, is to inspect work areas. My ambition is to be a good soldier, Captain."

"Sergeant, you leave those men there! I'll talk this over with you later."

"All right, Captain. I'll send a guard over for that prisoner. What's his name?"

"Ginsty, I guess it is."

"All right, sir, I'll take care of the punishment—sir."

The company clerk, his hand against Ben's shoulder, pulled the chair from under his rump. "You must think you're God." Ben fell on his knees.

Ben stood up. "Tell me one thing, Corporal. How the hell does a man draw pay and rank as a captain and carry on a private graft like an officers' mess?"

The company clerk leaned back in the chair. "Ha! Look who's talking about private grafts."

Ben dusted his knees. "Do you want my job? Did I ask for it?"

"Hell, yes," the company clerk said. "If I could talk Heinie, I'd want it. Don't get sore, Ben. I just want to be around when the roof falls in on you."

Ben shrugged. "What can they do?" he said. "Put me back on the towers? Listen, do me a favor. Send somebody over in a jeep to pick up a prisoner at the officers' mess. Put the prisoner in the solitary cell and tell the cooks to feed him today from our mess. Tell the compound leader to take *Gefreiter* Günstig off duty for five days. He'll be in solitary on bread and water starting tomorrow. And don't let me forget to have the major sign the PW Company Punishment Book tomorrow. O.K.?"

"Right," the company clerk said.

The chair before the officers' hut was empty. The old major stood on the boardwalk, hands on his hips, watching the prisoners kicking the ball. His back was thin and erect, buttocks a meager rounding in the pink gabardine trousers. The old man turned and the great curve of his belly swung into view. "Hello, Sahj'nt," the major said. "I been thinking about our talk. I want you to know that I don't believe in prejudice even if I do come from Mississippi."

The old man stepped from the slats, lowered his weight, and sat in the chair. "Sahj'nt," he said, "niggers are good people. You have to know how to treat them. Loyal children."

"Yes, sir," Ben said.

"Did you know it's a scientific fact reported by a Smithsonian scientist that a ligature closes in the skull of the

Negro at the age of twelve and makes further mental development impossible!"

"No, sir," Ben said.

The old man leaned back and sighed. "A scientific fact."

"With all due respect, Major," Ben said. "I would be willing to bet five dollars that you couldn't show me that in print."

The major folded his hands over his belly. "Sahj'nt," he said, "walk over there and peek through that door. Tell me what you see on my table."

Ben walked to the screen door. He pressed his nose against the rusted mesh and shaded his eyes.

"I see a bottle of whisky, Major."

"That's right, son." The old man sucked his upper lip. "Son, I won't take your money. But I'll bet you that bottle of whisky." His belly shook. "I've got the book in my trunk right there in my quarters!"

He rose pompously. "Come along with me."

Ben unhooked the screen and they entered the hut.

Whistling softly, the old man held his belly and leaned across the table to pull the chain of the lamp. In the brightness he crossed the room and, bracing a hand against the wall, leaned over a large wooden chest. He fumbled with one hand at the latch, flipped it over, grasped the hasp and pulled. The lid opened. Inside the trunk were books, photographs in faded cardboard covers, army manuals, souvenirs and a sword in a scabbard.

The fat officer dipped down and picked a book from the heap. The pages were yellow.

"Page sixty-seven," the major puffed. "It's underlined." He placed the book in Ben's hand with a flourish.

The title was in raised bosses: *A Recent History of the South*. Ben opened the book. Printed in the year 1912. The major, whistling, poured a drink into a thick mug. The smell was sweet in the hot cabin. Ben sat on the cot and turned to page sixty-seven.

The major set the empty cup on the board table. "Drink, Sahj'nt?" he said.

Ben swallowed. "No, thank you, sir. Not in the morning, sir." Something was sour in his throat.

"Well, Sahj'nt?"

Ben looked at the open volume on his lap. "Major, it says here that 'it has been suggested that a ligature in the Negro

cranium closes at the age of twelve.' Nothing about the Smithsonian." He closed the book and held it up. "This is a history of the South written by a Southerner no one ever heard of. I don't see even a degree after his name in the foreword. Where'd you get this specimen?"

The old man looked at Ben, leaned on the table, and sighed. "Son," he said, "you just won't face facts." He shook his head. "You're a good boy, but you won't face facts."

Ben laughed. "Bet's off, sir?"

The old man said, "I won't hold you to it, son. I'm kinda disappointed in you. A man's got to learn to face facts."

They went through the door into the sunlight, the old officer dragging a chair behind. He placed the chair in the shade of the wooden eaves. "Sit down, son, and we'll talk awhile. How'd you ever get to talk German?"

Ben told the major that the Army Specialized Training Program had shipped him from the Desert Training Center to Pasadena Junior College for tests and had given him a high score in language aptitude. "The only test I've ever enjoyed, Major. The first page gave a list of strange words and strange grammar rules for an invented language. Then you translated from English and into English, using that made-up vocabulary and syntax." He had hoped to be shipped East and closer to home. Groups were sent to Purdue and to Ohio and to New York. He had gone to Stanford. A beautiful school, but, in California. At the university his name had been posted for the Japanese course.

"Japanese?" the major said.

"Japanese," Ben said. "At Pasadena they had told me that because I had had three years of French I would be assigned French. They interviewed us again at Stanford and I said I thought I could learn a European language, but I doubted that I could gain any facility in Japanese. So they settled for German."

The major laughed and pulled out a cigar, tearing the cellophane. "The ways of the Army are sometimes mighty mysterious, son."

"I asked them why they were teaching me *any* language. I was limited service and they wouldn't send me overseas."

"What'd they say?"

"They said for me not to ask. It was all right with me. I sure didn't like the desert."

The old man asked, "Do you want to go overseas?"

"Yes," Ben said. "I don't want to get hurt, but I want to go overseas."

"Maybe I can help you, Sahj'nt."

"Major," Ben said, "don't misunderstand me. I wouldn't do a thing to get myself sent overseas. And I wouldn't do a thing to keep from being sent overseas. I don't tamper with fate. I'm not a brave man, just a curious one."

The major laughed. "I know what you mean, Sahj'nt. I'd be mighty suspicious of a brave man."

Tipped back in the chairs under the shade, the major and Ben smoked quietly. The major puffed the fat cigar, his jowls wattling as he rolled it gustily in his mouth.

"Major. Sir." Irving Kind stood before them, his feet close together in the grass, his dense body trembling.

The major took the cigar from his mouth. "Why, what is it, son?"

"Why is my name up on the board for duty?" Kind's lips were wet and his eyes were almost hidden by underswellings. "Why is my name posted? I haven't had a day off in three weeks. Everybody else has had three or four days. I'm going on night shift again and nobody else has it all the time. I won't go. It's not right, I should be treated right. I won't go."

The major shifted his weight and rose heavily and deliberately. Ben leaped from the chair. "Irving, the major has nothing to do with this. See the first sergeant! Get into the office and see the first sergeant!"

Irving reached out and grasped Ben's arm and pulled him close. He said into Ben's face, loudly, "I've seen the first sergeant! He laughed at me. He told me he'd report me to the commanding officer. He can report me to any son-of-a-bitching officer he wants to! Right is right!"

"Just a minute, soldier." The fat major pushed Ben aside. "There'll be no shirking of duty by anyone. Now, if you have a complaint, you perform your duty and notify me through proper channels. I'll overlook your language this time, soldier, but in the future remember military courtesy or I'll make you wish you had!"

Ben tugged at the arm of the trembling soldier. Kind said, "Don't you overlook a goddam thing! Right is right! I won't go up on those goddam towers tonight!"

"Come on, Irving," Ben said tightly, pulling at his arm. "Come on with me. I'll fix it up. Just shut your damn mouth."

A muscular arm drove a heavy hand into Ben's chest. "Get the hell away from me. Supposed to be my friend! You laugh at me, you and that goddam first sergeant and this fat-assed major! I don't care who I am, nobody can crap on me!"

Ben closed his eyes. "Sergeant Hoffman." The major's voice sounded like a motor saw biting into a log. "Take this man under armed guard to the M.P. stockade. I'm preferring charges!"

Ben said tiredly, "No, Major, you can't do that. This poor bastard is crazy as a loon. You can see it and I know it. The records are here. Let me give him company punishment and put him back on duty."

The fat old man stared coldly at him. "Snap to, Sergeant. On the double."

"Major, this man has been in the guardhouse three times for thirty days for insubordination. It does no good. Let me take him back to the barracks. He'll apologize."

Irving looked calmly at the major. "In a pig's ass," he said.

The major snapped, "Draw a pistol and take him to the stockade, Sergeant. Move!"

"Major Krugman," Ben said, "this man is too—"

"Ben," Irving said, "let's go. I'm ready."

Ben looked at him.

"Draw a .45 at the supply room, Sergeant," Major Krugman said.

"Yes, sir," Ben said.

Walking slowly on the planked walk, they passed the motor pool and the supply room. "Hey, Ben," Irving said, "you're supposed to get a pistol."

"Forget it," Ben said.

Overhead a bomber roared, climbing from number-six runway. Turning, Ben watched the great plane clear the tower shacks, the noise deafening the sentries. Irving offered him a cigarette.

"No," Ben said.

At the steps of the post library, Irving stopped. "What the hell," he said angrily, "do you want to get in trouble for?"

"Me!" Ben said.

Irving inhaled awkwardly. He coughed, the broad chest shaking. "Don't feel bad, Ben. I don't mind it in the stockade."

Ben halted on the walk. "Don't mind it! You told me you were billy-whipped the last time you were in."

"Oh, that guy," Irving said. "He had it in for me."

"Enjoy yourself," Ben said.

"I like it," Irving said stubbornly. "Honest, Ben, I like it. I like the guys in there. They don't take any crap."

"You want it," Ben said, "you got it. What am I supposed to do?"

"Who's asking you?" Irving said. "I don't have to take any crap from you, either."

"The hell you don't, Private Kind," Ben said. "You have to take it from everybody. Why the hell can't you be smart? I could have helped you."

"I *told* you about it, they were always putting me on duty and letting everybody else off," Irving said. "I *told* you."

"And I told you that the detachment is shorthanded and that I checked the roster. Everybody is being rotated. Your day off was coming up the end of the week, probably."

They walked on. "Here's the guardhouse," Irving said and threw away the cigarette. They stopped before the low unpainted wood structure. A wire fence in the rear enclosed a similar structure. "Take me in and sign the papers."

"Hello, Ben," the man at the desk said. "I have the papers made out. Your C.O. just called."

"Here he is, Sergeant," Ben said. "Give me a receipt and he's all yours."

"Send over my toilet kit, will you, Ben?" Irving said.

"Where's your pistol, Ben?" The sergeant at the desk laughed. "Regulations. The guard bringing in a prisoner must be armed."

"Pistol," Ben said. "Where the hell's he going to run to?"

Standing at the window of the orderly room, Ben held the hand phone and cranked the set. No one answered from the compound. He spun the crank steadily.

"Befehl?" he said. "Where the hell you been?" He listened. "I don't care where you've been. You're supposed to keep a man in that office all the time. You've got six men assigned to camp administration and I want one in that office day and night." He fished in his pocket for a cigarette. He lit it. "You're supposed to be efficient, Befehl."

"Ja, Herr Hoffman," the phone said. *"Sicher."*

"Listen," Ben said. "You know Günstig is in the detention cell. Send over his toilet kit and a towel."

"What did he do, Herr Hoffman? Günstig is a hard worker. What did he do?"

"Something *schrecklich*," Ben said. "Terrible. Listen, you can give him a book from the library, too. One."

He hung the black instrument on the fork.

"Corporal," Ben said to the company clerk, "if anybody wants me, I'll be in my bunk, whimpering."

CHAPTER NINE

BEN took the afternoon mail from the footlocker. He sat on the bunk and read the letter from home. Mom wrote that everyone was well. He smiled. While he was in Washington State, Mom said everybody was well; later from someone else he found out that his sister, Susan, had been taken to the hospital in the middle of the night, an emergency appendectomy performed. She had been in the hospital two weeks. And all the time, faithful letters from Mom: everybody is well, don't worry. Bless her unscrupulous heart.

I wonder how business is, Ben thought. That damn grocery. In debt, always, paying off one note at the bank by taking out another. Dad's too soft to refuse credit—charity—to anybody with a sob story. Every time I give him hell, he says don't worry, son, we're not starving.

You'd do the same, he says.

I wouldn't, Ben thought. He looked at the letter folded on his bare knees. Mom wrote that the piano teacher was excited about Susan's playing. She had been featured at a recital. Ben took his wallet from the trousers hung over the foot of the bunk. Twenty dollars left. The kid's birthday was next week. He stood up and pulled on the khaki trousers. Smiling, he thought, I couldn't sit around in shorts at home, not with my kid sister frowning at me, afraid I'd shame her if her friends suddenly came in.

He dressed and drove the jeep into Charleston. Parking on a side street, he walked along King Street, looking into shop windows.

A loud-speaker hung above the doorway of a radio store, blaring country music into the narrow street. Ben entered. Glassed-in booths lined a wall of the store. He moved along the counters, selecting albums of piano music. He opened a Rachmaninoff album.

"Hello!"

Ben turned. A young red-haired girl, starched blue-and-white cap on her head, smiled frankly at him. A blue pinafore covered her white dress. Her shoes and stockings were white. On the sleeve of her blouse was a blue-and-white Nurse's Aide emblem.

"Do you like music, too?" she said.

Ben stared at her. "Yes," he said. "But this is not for me." On the bosom of her pinafore was sewn a white cloth strip: Virginia Laird. The daughter of the plantation owner.

"Miss Laird," Ben said, "I didn't recognize you. You're a Nurse's Aide."

She widened her eyes. "How observant, Mr. Hoffman. I work at the hospital afternoons after classes."

"Classes?" Ben said.

"I'm a sophomore at the College of Charleston. Are you getting that concerto for the prisoners?"

Ben looked down at the album. "For the prisoners?" he said stupidly. "It's for my sister."

She stood near him, her face fresh and mocking. "I hear you're so kind to your prisoners, I thought maybe . . ."

Ben looked at her. She smelled bland and clean, like soap. What's the matter? he thought. She's making fun of me. And I let her.

"What do you do at the hospital, Miss Laird?" he said.

"I help in the surgical ward."

"That's wonderful," Ben said. "Do you like it?"

"Love it," she said.

"I find hospitals unpleasant," Ben said. "I wouldn't step foot in one unless I had to."

"I like helping," she said.

"I don't like to see suffering," Ben said.

"I don't like sensitive people, Mr. Hoffman," she said, smiling deliberately.

"Sensitive?" Ben said.

"I hate cruel people," she said.

Ben was silent. I must be sun-struck, he thought. What is she talking about?

"You turn your back on suffering," she said.

Ben stared at her. "My mother is a Nurse's Aide," he said, finally.

"Good-by, Mr. Hoffman," she said. He watched the screen door close behind her. Her back was erect and graceful.

He bought the album and told the clerk to gift-wrap it

and send it to New Jersey. He wrote a card and put it in the front cover.

He drove back to camp. A young girl approaches me, he thought, and I get tongue-tied. Army life. Maybe we share a woman, but what do we ever share *with* a woman?

He smiled. She sure stomped on me. She thinks I'm cruel. She's indignant. She's young enough to be indignant. Young and fresh and pretty.

Army life, he thought. Living among men, always. Worse than homosexual, it's unisexual. Maybe I need something like you, Virginia.

CHAPTER TEN

LATE in the morning Ben woke. He had coffee with Befehl in the prisoner mess hall, made a belated head count, dismissed the formation, waited for the gate sergeant to unlock the wire barrier, and went into the detachment mess hall to his office.

Walther Urleid, the German clerk, was seated at the card table set up next to Ben's desk. He bent over a crossword puzzle. Glancing up, he said, "Hello, Ben," and bent over the puzzle again. The top of Ben's desk was clean. In the center, on four stubby wooden legs, stood a cedar cigarette box, shining in high polish. Inlaid in the lift-off top was a design of wood, white against the cedar grain. The white wood formed two initials: BH. Ben lifted the box. On one side were wooden letters pasted in bas relief: IST DAS NICHT EIN GARTENHAUS? A German kindergarten song. On the other side was: DA KANNSTE NIX MOCHE! Ben laughed: it was his stock phrase to complaining prisoners. Plattdeutsch for "tough luck—nothing can be done!" From one end of the box protruded a W; from the other end, a U. Walther Urleid, German clerk.

"Walther?" Ben said.

"We have worked long together, Ben," the German said. "I wanted you to have something to remember we worked together."

"Beautiful," Ben said, turning it over in his hands. A rich acrid cedar scent rose from the box. "It must have taken you a long time."

"Ben," Walther said, "the evenings are long and empty."

"Yes," Ben said. "I thank you very much."

He sat at the desk, staring at the box. Walther leaned back in his chair and talked. The box gleamed like a new coin. Walther made a ritual of these late-morning conversations. Twenty-two years old, Nazi-educated.

"Ben," he said, "I tell you I can believe in nothing—not even in your democracy. You tell me to believe only that every man has dignity."

"That's all," Ben said.

"I can't believe even in Christianity," the German said. "How could a man who could die be a God?"

"Are you a Jew?" Ben said.

"I don't believe even that Göring and the high Nazis will be punished by your democracy," Walther said. "The big ones always stick together. It is only the little men on both sides who suffer."

"Are you a Communist?"

Walther put his head in his hands. "Ben, I don't know anything—I can't believe anything. I can believe only that the winner is always right. I can't do anything but be cynical."

Ben said, "Be cynical. It's healthy."

The cedar box was joined and rimmed with whitewood. He pushed it, watching it slide smoothly on the cleared desk. "Democracy *is* cynicism," he said slowly. "It protects man from himself. It knows human nature. One man's ambitions are limited by other men's ambitions. Democracy allows all men to restrain any one man. It doesn't make a religion of any one man's goodness. We agree only on mutual good." He placed a hand on the box. "This means no man can be a total force for bad. It also means, thank God, that no man can be a total force for good." He hesitated and added, embarrassedly, "We *are* our brother's keeper."

Walther looked at him. "Why do you say 'thank God'?"

"I think Hitler believed himself a force for good, don't you?"

Walther's face set brutally. "What a question, Ben! I don't care what that foolish man believed; he hurt my life, that I know."

Strong brewing coffee smell was in the office. Shouts in German came from the kitchen. The shrill voice of the mess sergeant floated languidly in the air. "You Jerry boys *are* a trial," it drawled. "Now clean it up and in a hurry!"

Walther smiled, listening to the Germans berating each other. "Ben, I tell you this and it is strange." He drew a swift circle about the crossword puzzle on the page. "In these days I feel free. I think and I feel free. I do not

hate. I have not known this feeling before. As a prisoner of war in America, I feel free."

The card table shook under the pencil. "It's not so strange," Ben said. "In a prison men must live together. They can't get away from each other. You are not free to act—so you are free to think clearly. You no longer have acts you must justify. You must each do for the others what the others must do for you. Otherwise, life would be unbearable. A prisoner must live within himself—he must think—if he is to live. If a man lives within himself he can live with others."

The German sat back and folded his arms. "This I wanted to tell you with the cigarette box. It is that for men in prison the ideal of brotherhood is not a soft luxury. It is the only weapon of survival. Hate is suicide."

Ben fingered the cedar case. "Incredible. Men lock other men into an area the size of a postage stamp—and only in such inhumanity does humanity grow. So now you are an idealist. Of course, what have you to lose? You are a prisoner. But, as a conqueror, who is an idealist? Were you? Aren't you a Nazi? Am I not a Jew? If you are not a Nazi, who is? Either all of you are Nazis or no one is."

Walther laughed. "Pardon me, Ben, but *you* sound now like a Nazi. Tell me, is a Jew a prisoner?"

Ben smiled and ripped a half-empty cigarette package open with his thumb. He lifted the lid from the box and spilled cigarettes into the chest. "A Jew is a prisoner."

The German rested his arm on the newspaper. "Is a Jew free?"

"Free to think. There is no other freedom."

"Listen to me. We sit here always about the crossword puzzle in *The New York Times* from Sunday, breaking our head, getting a headache, just to find the word. I ask you now what word means Nazi and Jew and German and American?"

"How many letters?" Ben said.

"M-A-N. Maybe I believe in this."

"Until you go back to Germany?"

Walther stared at the puzzle. "Maybe only."

Ben said, "Every man has dignity. Believe that. Thank you for the cigarette box, Walther. It is beautiful."

Walther folded the paper and put it in the desk. He

spread the work report form over the card table and entered numbers from the stack of Kommando rosters.

Ben opened a drawer and took out a book. Thank the Good Lord, he thought, for books. They teach me that life is not a conspiracy against me. They teach me that I am everyone. I am not an alien sufferer. Everyone suffers.

Everyone. I didn't understand that as a child. I was the only sufferer.

How old was I in 1933? Eleven? The news photographs of old men on their knees in the streets. Frail old men on hands and knees, beards touching rough cobblestones. The young men in beautiful boots and britches standing around the old men. The young men had clubs and were laughing. The old men were crying. They were scrubbing the street with toothbrushes. The young men were laughing. On the sidewalks women and children stood laughing at the old men scrubbing and crying.

I read then in the newspaper: girls torn from parents, wives from husbands, mothers from children. The women were raped. By the men with the beautiful boots and britches. I was full of horror. Why? I didn't even know what *rape* meant. A horror beyond words.

I didn't believe the newspapers. Who printed them?

What was wrong with the old men and the women?

The newspaper said they were Jews. Being Jewish was their crime. How did you avoid the crime? How did you repent the crime?

My mother and father are kind and good. They are Jews. I am a Jew. Are the Jews in Germany like us? But they are German. I am American.

Would Americans do that to Jews?

What a question. I am an American. I'm an American to me. Am I to them? Them? The customers in my father's store?

Newspapers, radios, newsreels reporting humiliation, murder of Jews. I stopped asking my parents. What could they say to explain a pogrom to me? They couldn't explain it to themselves. It can't happen. It does happen.

How did I survive that summer of 1933? In that hot heavy attic, thinking in the yellow sunlight and dust.

After that summer I was better.

I didn't hate Germans. They were not people. Nobody was people unless they were sufferers. Jews were people. I would

kill Germans—any Jew-haters—if they came near my family. With the butcher knives in the store or with the .22 my dad had let me buy from my cousin though Mom had raised the roof.

I would not let my family be hurt or humiliated.

I had a heart empty of hatred and full of death.

I was as single-minded as the Nazis.

"Ben," Walther said, "I have to go to the compound to check these rosters with Befehl."

"What?" Ben put the book on the desk. "All right. Tell the gate sergeant to send in Günstig from solitary, will you?"

"O.K., Ben," Walther said. He walked from the office.

Ben emptied the ash tray into the wastebasket. He sat back in the chair, yawning, rubbing his eyes. The inlaid cedar box shimmered on the desk.

At the edge of the screen, a prisoner appeared and stepped before the desk. His heels stamped into place and his hand swung from his side into the air, his arm held rigidly forward from the shoulder, the open palm down.

"Günstig," Ben said mildly, "that salute is forbidden."

The blond boy smiled, high cheekbones narrowing his eyes. His khaki shirt was too small. Blond hair was visible in the gaps between the buttons. "I know no other, Herr Hoffman," he said.

"You have committed a serious offense," Ben said. "At ease, Günstig." The German moved one foot and relaxed. "You were caught with an American woman. This is a violation of law."

Günstig smiled. A front tooth was broken. "The American women are easy. It is not a thing of which to be proud." His voice was soft, the German words cadenced and melodic.

"Easy?" Ben said.

"Whores. Their tongues hang out for men."

Ben raised his eyebrows. "You are rather insulting to our women."

"Herr Hoffman," the blond prisoner said courteously, "perhaps it would be more correct to say that your women are anybody's women."

Ben brushed a hair from the pad on the desk blotter. "Perhaps you are right. A woman that would go to you would go to anyone."

"You cannot insult me, Herr Hoffman."

"Why not?"

"You envy me."

"I do?"

"I am what you cannot be."

"What's that?"

"Pure."

"Pure what?" Ben tested the pencil point on the pad. "Never mind; I know what you mean, my pathetic friend. Let's get back to business. Sit down."

Günstig sat in a straight-backed chair. "Thank you," he said. "You know what I mean, of course."

"I know, my friend. I'm a Jew."

"You are."

"And Communists are Jews?"

"Certainly."

"And capitalists are Jews?"

"Of course."

"And Communists hate capitalists."

"Naturally."

"And capitalists hate Communists?"

"Like poison!"

"Then why do Nazis worry? Where is your German *Mathematik?* Jews cancel out—Nazis are unnecessary."

"Jews are bastard hyenas," Günstig said. "They laugh. They have no courage. They can only laugh. Laugh, Herr Sergeant Hoffman!"

Ben smiled. "You are entitled to your opinions, my friend." He leaned forward on the desk and said seriously, "Listen. I know the Germans were humiliated after the First World War. You were cruelly treated; you were patronized; you were plundered. The German was kept on his knees."

"You should know it," Günstig said.

"I know this: For much you are not to blame. If you are forced to your knees, forced to betray your dignity as a man, then you must lock yourself in your pride and deny that man exists beyond your group, the German 'race.' You pray for revenge. Man does not exist for you beyond the German race. You are a German and no longer man. It is understandable. The Negro in America understands you. The Jew in the world understands you. They have the same emotions."

"Your speech is nice," Günstig said tightly. "Words. I

am a German and Germans know how to be men. We fight. We do not sit in safety and talk to prisoners."

Ben frowned. "How did you ever get to *be* a prisoner?" He held his hand up. "I mean this. If one is accused, tried and condemned in one word—'German!' 'Negro!' or 'Jew!' —then he becomes either a mad animal, locked in himself, or he becomes strong in understanding, a man. Such awareness is available in pure form only to members of oppressed groups. You and I share such experience. Do you understand, my friend?"

A muscle jerked in the blond boy's cheek. He sat on the edge of the chair. "Here it does not take courage," he said, "to say *Jew* and *Negro* with *German*. It does not take courage here!"

Ben laughed. "I have another theory about prejudice. You hate what you are not, to keep from hating what you are. How is that one, my friend?"

The prisoner rose and strode to the desk. He leaned over and slapped Ben. "I am not your friend, Jew!"

Ben sat, unbelieving, his eyes closed. The flesh of his face stung, the skin dry and tight. "In self-defense!" he whispered. "In self-defense!"

He opened his eyes and rose, trembling. "Nazi!" he said.

The prisoner, hands on hips, laughed. "Certainly! Now, punish me with your solitary and your bread and water."

Ben's voice shook. "There is no army between you and me." He stepped carefully around the desk. He swung his open palm against the prisoner's ear. The sound crackled in the room.

"A-agh!" the German said and fell back. He hit the wall and jumped, hands outstretched for Ben's throat. His fingers hit Ben's jaw and worked desperately for the neck. Ben braced him away from his body with a stiff forearm. He clubbed his fist and brought it down, a hammer blow on the bridge of the German's nose.

The German stood upright, almost on tiptoe, his face sullen in shock. Through a film of water, his eyes searched Ben's.

Ben breathed deeply. "Brave Nazi," he said. The heavy boot crashed against his shin. Ben screamed and fell to one knee.

He reached out from the floor, grabbed the booted foot and rose, lifting the leg viciously shoulder high. Günstig's

body left the floor, poised an easy moment in the air, and crashed to the floor, the head striking first and then the body tumbling. He lay still. His eyes were closed.

Ben rose, rubbing his shin. He sat in the chair, crying, rubbing at the shin. He hopped around the office, collapsed on the floor. He pulled up the trouser leg and rubbed the shin. The knife-pain dulled.

From the kitchen the three Germans on duty ran into the mess hall around the screen into Ben's office. They stopped short.

"Herr Hoffman, was ist los? Wir haben den Krach gehört!"

Ben said heavily in German, "He hit me because I am a Jew. Bring a pitcher of water and throw it over him."

Otto stood over Ben. "What's wrong with your shin—it's red and swollen!"

"He kicked me." Otto lifted Ben to the chair. The other Germans were standing above Günstig.

"Get the water!" Ben said impatiently.

The two Germans stood, thoughtfully gazing at Günstig. Otto turned and ran from the office.

He struck the screen when he returned. He stood before Ben and tore the paper from a pound of yellow butter. He knelt and rubbed the melting bar gently on the bruise. Cool and soothing on the bone. Ben swallowed and looked at the standing prisoners. "Get him some water," he said quietly.

The blond young baker muttered, "Let him sleep, *den Lump!*" and walked out. The third prisoner looked puzzledly around the office. *"Blötsinn,"* he said.

" 'Nonsense' is right," Ben said. Otto rose and smiled. The yellow butter was melting in his hand.

"Better, Ben?"

Ben nodded. "Yes. Thank you, Otto." He shook the pant leg down. Günstig moaned and lifted his head.

Ben said, "Get up, soldier. I have some questions to ask you."

A tirade of German burst from Otto. He ran to Günstig and jerked him to his feet. "We are men of honor, *Lump!* We are not assassins! I will kill you if you make of us barbarians! *Verbrecher!*"

Stunned, Günstig stood before the desk. He held his body stiffly erect.

"Name?"

"Günstig, Erich, *Soldat*, Herr *Feldwebel.*"

Ben wrote on the pad. "Address in Germany?"

Günstig gave the address.

"Date of capture?"

"May 12, 1943, Herr *Feldwebel.*"

"Date of birth?"

"November 10, 1923, Herr *Feldwebel.*"

Ben put the pencil down. "The commanding officer has authorized me to tell you that for your offense you will serve five days in the solitary cell on bread and water. Any questions?"

"No, sir."

"Do you wish to see the commanding officer?"

"No, sir."

"Tell the sergeant at the gate hut to put you in the cell. Dismissed."

At the door the blond prisoner turned and said, "In spite of all, Herr Hoffman, you *are* a Jew."

"Certainly," Ben said. "Thank you for telling me."

He pressed the pencil on the desk pad. The point broke and slid under the cedar cigarette chest. Civilians standing in line for butter, he thought, and a German prisoner wastes a pound.

He wiped his face with a handkerchief and sat back in the chair. Günstig, he thought, I respect you for saying what's in your mind. And you gave me a moment of pure happiness today when your head clunked that floor.

The shower stung and steamed. His head bent, water pelting the nape, Ben sang. "I walk alone, for to tell you the truth I am lonely." He curled his toes over the wooden slats, soapy water slathering through onto the concrete, swirling into the drain. His voice resounded over the shower roar.

A sudden gush of water scalded his skin. He leaped, stumbling from the shower. "You bastard!" he yelled at the man in the next shower. "Tell me when you turn another shower on!"

The nipples on the breast of the man shook. A roll of fat trembled on his stomach. He smiled gently, large lips pursed. "I'm very sorry." His eyes were tender.

Blotting gingerly with the rough towel, Ben watched the man under the spray wet his armpits, then fumble on the

wall and turn the taps. "Manny," Ben said, "the prisoners would love you. A girlish body like yours."

Manny soaped his body. His plump hands caressed his flesh, gliding in slow circles. "Why, Sergeant Hoffman, why do you say that?" He smiled trustingly at Ben.

Ben wrapped the towel around his waist. He picked the brush from the shelf below the long mirror and began to lather his face. Behind him the roar of the shower stopped.

"You have a hicky on your back, Ben. Would you like me to squeeze it for you?"

"Manny," Ben said into the mirror pleasantly. "Keep your obscene hands to yourself."

The voice shifted into hurt. "I only wanted to help you, Ben. Why are you always so suspicious of your friends?"

Ben watched in the mirror the lathered stubble moving cleanly down his face and a red dot showing on the skin. Tough beard and tender skin. My heritage.

"You cut yourself," the voice said.

"Thanks," Ben said.

The naked man held an open bottle of lotion before Ben's eyes. "Put this on. It will coagulate the blood."

Ben put the razor in the sink and held the hot-water faucet open. "Forget it, Manny. It won't help you get a pass. So forget it." He threw hot water on the cut.

Manny put the lotion on the shelf beside Ben's shaving cream. He said accusingly, "Always suspicious." He wiped himself with a huge towel. Embossed in blue was HOTEL PALMETTO. "What are you doing tonight?"

"I have to stay in camp. Charge of quarters." Ben shaved his left cheek, looking over the bridge of his nose into the mirror with the right eye. The one handicap of a one-eyed man. He smiled into the mirror. Kids are crazy. I spent a whole day as a kid, trying to get rid of the feeling I was a Cyclops with a great heavy eye in the center of my forehead.

"That's too bad," Manny said, rubbing his knees with the hotel towel. "I could get a friend for you."

"Where you going, Manny? Seeing that little hillbilly waitress?"

"She's a sweet little Southern girl and she loves me, Ben. We're going to be married."

"Sorry," Ben said. "Southern girl. Are you still teaching her how to get tips?"

"You think it's funny, but she's grateful. She's gotten twice as much in tips since she met me. I taught her to wear low-cut frocks. We picked them out together. And to kind of touch men's shoulders, you know, with the bodice when she serves. She never even used to smile at them!"

"Manny, are all New York waiters pimps? Or just you?"

"Ben, you don't understand anything. I love that girl and she loves me."

Ben splashed his face and looked into the mirror. He turned. Manny was sitting on the edge of a commode, snowing talcum on his genitals.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Manny lifted his head and said sweetly, "Why, Ben, I told you I was going to see my girl."

The office was quiet in the night. Ben sat alone at the desk, reading by the shaded lamp. Dust on the window-panes softened the glare of the searchlights across the road. The rustle of the pages made a gentle sound.

He finished the book and laid it on the blue blotter. *A Passage to India.* E. M. Forster. Beautifully done. Completely expressed.

Forster lies, he thought. Nobody believes in futility. Not if he takes the trouble to say so. Forster writes that everything man does is just empty sound in an endless cave. A whisper of nothing. Yet he writes a book. For what purpose if there is no purpose? Why?

Why not?

The office went black. Ben sat up, thinking in instant familiar panic: blindness? In the blackness his fingers moved quickly over the desk, the book. He reached for matches.

He heard his name shouted outside. Footsteps spattered on the slatted walk. "Hoffman!" The door crashed open. "Where the hell are you? Hoffman!"

Ben struck a match and held aloft the flame.

"Raffia," he said. "Shut up. It's just a power failure. They'll fix it."

"Gotta guard the goddam krauts! I'm sergeant of the guard, I gotta do something!"

"The Germans are asleep," Ben said. "And our men are asleep. Listen, pull the men off the towers. We've got six trucks here. Put a truck at each corner of the stockade

and turn on the headlights along the fence. Put a guard in each cab."

"Right!" Raffia shouted. Ben threw the burnt match into the darkness and said, "Wait!" He lit another match. "You take the jeep and keep it in motion around the perimeter. Examine the fence for cuts. And be quiet about it. Calm down. Don't wake up the men."

"Right!" Raffia cried. He plunged out the door.

Ben drew a cigarette from his shirt in the dark. He slipped his feet into his shoes under the desk. New Yorkers, he thought. Raffia must be missing every third reflex. They must live in another time dimension. Jerk and twitch. Like squirrels. A minute of my life is an hour in a squirrel's life. A squirrel looks jerky to me and probably looks smooth and relaxed to another squirrel. Raffia's nutty as a squirrel anyhow.

He walked from the office, shoelaces trailing.

The trucks drove from the yard on the road around the compound. The guards parked them in position, the long bright beams stretching long down the wire fence. Barbs gleamed on the crossed wire. Far corners were dim. The jeep raced the sections of fence, tires squealing at the turns. Ben heard Raffia shouting in the jeep.

Ben stepped into the road before the gate shack and held up his hand in the headlight beam. "Whoa!" he said. The jeep stopped, shuddering. "The fence all right?"

"Ha!" Raffia said, climbing from the jeep. The holster flapped against the metal. He made an exaggerated salute. "Everything in order!"

The searchlights on the tower suddenly shot white light into the compound. Streetlights showed the trucks parked on the road. The guards in the cabs shouted. In the office window the desk lamp shone dimly.

"For nothing!" Raffia said. He cursed.

Ben said, "You did a good job, Raffia. Let's get the trucks back in the yard and the men back up on the towers."

Raffia drove the jeep to each truck and told the men to mount the towers. The trucks were left empty, parked by the fence corners. Ben drove a truck to the yard and parked it and walked back for the next truck. Raffia parked the jeep and went into the gate shack.

After parking the last truck, Ben entered the gate shack. Raffia was sitting in the rickety cane chair by the rusty

stove, staring fixedly through the open door at the compound. Ben plugged the hotplate cord into the socket beside the single hanging bulb. The coffee pot was still warm. He saw through the screened window a guard standing on the tower, rifle on his back. "Raffia," Ben said, "do the tower phones work all right? I ordered new batteries last week."

"Why?" Raffia said. He thrust his fist toward the compound across the road. "Why the hell ain't I home? Those bastards—whatta I gotta watch those bastards for? My wife, huh? What she doin'? Those bastards got wives? What they doin'? You're goddam right!" He leaped to his feet, the heavy .45 revolver thumping against his thigh, and stamped to the open door. He yelled into the wire enclosure. "Bastards! Lice!"

Ben chuckled. "Relax, Raffia." He poured a cup of coffee from the charred pot on the hotplate. He looked curiously at the gray scum floating on the steaming black liquid. "At least, you see your wife once in a while. They don't."

"Ah, what the hell you know? You ain't married. You lay a hillbilly and you're happy."

Ben lowered himself into the cane chair and sipped the thick black coffee. "*Compare,* you're here. You didn't have to fight. What do you want?"

"You think I'm yella?" Raffia tore open the holster on his thigh and pulled out the revolver. "You think I'm yella?" He waved the revolver in the air. The muzzle hit the door jamb. "Tell me I didn't want to fight!"

Ben balanced the cup on the arm of the chair and rose. "Raffia, my friend, you know why you're here? You're nuts. You know why I'm here? I got one eye." His voice trembled and he lowered it to a whisper. "You know why I got one eye? Some crazy son of a bitch handling bullets just like you are now. Put that pistol back, or I swear to you, I'll break this goddam chair over your head!" He heard his voice rising. "And while we're at it, you ginzo bastard, if I ever hear you call me *Mattsu Crist* again, I'll kill you, you son of a bitch! Those Nazis were taught that, but where the hell do you get it from? Where the hell do you get it from?"

Now what? Ben thought. I'm getting a hell of a lot of satisfaction today. He sat down and picked up the cup of coffee.

Raffia, revolver hanging limply in his hand, stared at him.

"Put that pistol away, *compare,*" Ben said. "You'll have me as nuts as you are."

Raffia jammed the weapon into his holster. "What's wrong with *Mattsu Crist?*" he demanded. "You ashamed?"

"*Mattsu Crist,*" Ben said, "means Christ-killer."

"It does?" Raffia said. "Whatta you know. So what? He hitched the cartridge belt up on his waist. The heavy revolver dragged the webbing down on his thigh. "So what? This whole goddam war is a Christ-killer! It's a goddam *Mattsu Crist* war!"

Ben sipped the coffee, perplexed. "Madmen," he said. "Babes and fools. What the hell are you saying?" He laughed. "I don't know whether to break your large nose or shake your hand. What are you saying?"

Raffia shrugged. "I mean I want to go home. I got a wife and kids. A wife and kids!" He moved toward the door. Suddenly he turned. "Why don't you get you a wife and kids?" he asked. "Why climb my ass?"

"You son of a bitch," Ben said placidly. "You got me beat."

"Ha!" Raffia said. "Don't mess around with me, Hoffman. I'll hit the book." He crowed triumphantly, darting his head forward. "Ha! Sick Call, 7:30, all over the world!" He tapped his head. "I got it here! It's on my medical record. Mess around me and I'll have a nervous relapse!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BEN drove the truck, sitting upright in the seat to keep his sunburnt back from touching. The squat little weapons carrier truck burred along the hot road.

"You are a fool," Pancho said, hanging his foot over the side on the running board. "Only a fool sleeps in the sun and burns his body."

"It doesn't hurt much," Ben said. "It just feels hot."

"Ah, but later," Pancho said thoughtfully. "The skin will dry and crack and split. Blisters will form and break. Water will run down your body. You will itch, you will want to tear the skin from your body. The pain will be great."

Ben slowed for the entrance booth. "Are you part Apache, Pancho?"

"No!" Pancho said. "I am Spanish. Pure Spanish."

In the yard two men in fatigues were loading a heavy metal disc with a long handle onto a truck. The two men climbed into the cab and drove away.

Ben turned the key in the dashboard and the motor died. "Pancho," he said, "what was that?"

"I have seen none since Anzio," Pancho said. "It was a mine detector."

Ben pulled his bathing trunks from between the seats. "Hang this up for me, will you, Pancho? I'm going in the office."

In the orderly room the company clerk pointed a thumb at the office. "A military police lieutenant waiting for you, Ben. We've had some excitement."

Ben pushed through the door. A young man stood by the window, watching the prisoners in the compound. He turned.

"Sergeant Hoffman? I've been waiting for you."

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant. We've been out to Folly Beach, swimming."

"I've been here two hours," the lieutenant said. "Were you off duty this afternoon?"

"Legally, Lieutenant," Ben said, "I'm still off duty."

"Don't get your bowels in an uproar, Sergeant," the young man said. He stretched forth his hand. "I'm Lieutenant Chasten. Criminal Investigation Division. Glad to meet you."

"A pleasure, sir," Ben said.

"A short-wave receiver has been missing from the Parts Depot since last week," the lieutenant said. "We've been investigating the theft. We cleared the American personnel and found that a detail of German prisoners work as maintenance in the building and on the grounds every day. We thought one of them might have taken it."

"That's not likely, Lieutenant," Ben said. "Every German prisoner is shaken down before he enters the compound. Part of the gate sergeant's duty. Under the armpits, between the legs, every prisoner is shaken down."

"We brought over a mine detector," the lieutenant said. "Your first sergeant let us in. We found the radio buried three feet under the latrine floor."

"No!" Ben said.

"Yes," the young officer said.

"I'll be damned. That's the Parts Depot Kommando?"

"That's right. According to their records, that detail has had the same German leader for three months. Until last week."

The officer unfolded a Kommando roster. Ben spread it on the desk. "Rudolf Schlau. Have you spoken to him, Lieutenant?"

"He says he doesn't speak English. He's in the compound now. Will you interpret for me?"

Ben opened the door and shouted to the company clerk, "Ring the compound. Tell Befehl to send Schlau over here. Tell him *schnell!* We're waiting for him."

Ben unbuttoned his shirt, shrugging his reddened skin away from the cloth.

"Why do you suppose they wanted a short-wave receiver?" the officer said. "I saw plenty of radios in the compound."

"Propaganda, I suppose," Ben said. "They think our news reports are false. Probably wanted to tune in Berlin direct."

"The whole compound must have known about it."

"No doubt about that," Ben said.

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Try to find the thief. That's what you want, isn't it, sir?"

"I mean what are you going to do about the prisoners listening to the short wave?"

"Nothing," Ben said. "Why should I?"

"The man who stole it will probably get five years in a federal penitentiary for theft of government property."

"That's the chance he took," Ben said.

"Your security must be pretty bad."

"Lieutenant, you're responsible for the safety of your critical equipment. How does a prisoner we send out to clean your building have access to critical equipment? That's your security, not ours."

"Sergeant, you're absolutely right. I went into service right after law school. I'm just keeping in practice."

Ben laughed. He plucked at his shirt. Needles of pain darted at his back. "Sir, I'm going to get a drink of water. I'm burning up. Stayed out in the sun too long."

In the kitchen Ben drank two glasses of water.

He opened the door to the office and the young lieutenant was sitting at the captain's desk. Rudolf Schlau stood at attention, khakis freshly pressed, hair neatly combed.

"*Servus*, Herr Schlau," Ben said.

"*Servus*, Herr Hoffman."

Ben said to the lieutenant, "Do you understand German?"

"No, Sergeant."

"Schlau," Ben said. "The lieutenant says you stole a radio."

The tall German smiled. "The lieutenant is mistaken."

"We found the radio."

"What radio, Herr Hoffman?"

"The radio he says you stole."

"I stole no radio, Herr Hoffman."

"Now we'll sing the chorus," Ben said.

"Pardon, Herr Hoffman?"

"Nothing, Herr Schlau. A joke."

The lieutenant looked at Ben. "What does he say?"

"He says he stole no radio."

Ben sat in a chair. "Sit down, Herr Schlau."

"Schlau," Ben said, "the radio was found in the compound, buried under the floor of the latrine. How did it get there?"

The prisoner pulled a chair up to the desk and sat. He

leaned on his elbows and said, "Herr Hoffman, you know it is impossible for a prisoner to take anything into the compound. The guards examine every prisoner when he returns from Kommando."

"I know," Ben said. "I told the officer it is impossible. But he's stubborn. He wants to know how the radio got under the floor of the latrine inside the compound."

The prisoner laughed. "That *is* a mystery."

"Germans are clever," Ben said. "Crafty! It takes courage to steal a radio and march it into the compound." He spoke to the officer in English, "Do you mind if I take off my shirt? This damn sunburn is killing me."

"No," the lieutenant said. "Go ahead. If you know what you're doing."

"I'm no detective," Ben said. "You have any questions you want me to ask?"

"No. Carry on, Hoffman. We'll see later."

Ben removed his shirt and hung it on the back of the chair.

The prisoner whistled. "Herr Hoffman, you are baked!"

"Yes," Ben said. "And it hurts."

"You have my sympathy."

"Thanks, Herr Schlau."

Ben rose and walked around the room, tenderly and awkwardly touching his back. He offered the lieutenant a cigarette. The officer refused. Schlau took one and offered Ben the flame from a lighter.

Ben sat on the floor against the wall. "You have me baffled, Herr Schlau. You are a magician." He smoked in silence. He said suddenly in bitterness, "It wouldn't happen in a prison camp in Germany, would it, Herr Schlau?"

"No, Herr Hoffman, I do not think it would."

"The American Army!" Ben said. "Stupidity! At least, the Nazis know how to be efficient."

"If things were different, Herr Hoffman," the prisoner said, "you would make a good officer in the German Army."

"Thank you, Schlau," Ben said.

The lieutenant stared at Ben sitting on the floor, naked to his waist, fingering his back. "Lieutenant," Ben said, "you did not tell me the truth. You understand German."

"A little," the officer said. "What I understand is damned peculiar."

Ben looked up from the floor at the German in the chair. "How was the radio gotten into camp?"

Schlau laughed.

"You're smarter than I," Ben said.

"Think," Schlau said. "Think, Herr Hoffman."

"We've tried," Ben said. "We're stupid. You go out in the morning, you come back in the evening. The guard shakes each prisoner down. A prisoner took a stolen radio past the guard. How?"

"Herr Hoffman, do not think to fool me. You are smart. You will figure it out."

"Schlau, I appreciate your compliments. I'll try. You go out in the morning on trucks. You wear your suntans. You come back at night. You take lunch with you."

"You see," Schlau said, smiling. "I have said nothing."

"You see?" Ben said. "You see! What do I see?"

"You reason well," Schlau said, looking down at Ben. "You reason very well."

"You go out in the morning. You wear suntans. You take lunch. You come back at night."

"We are faithful workers," Schlau said, laughing. "Rain or sun, we work."

"Rain or sun?" Ben said.

"Rain or sun, Herr Hoffman."

"Hoffman," the lieutenant said. "I don't care if you have a social visit with your friend, but I'm here on business."

"Lieutenant," Ben said, "let me visit a while longer. Then if you have any searching questions, I'll interpret."

Schlau stubbed out his cigarette in the captain's ash tray. "Are you finished, Herr Hoffman?"

Ben looked up at the prisoner. "Rain or shine?"

"Rain or sun, Herr Hoffman."

"You work when it rains?"

"Of course, Herr Hoffman. Do you let us rest in the huts?"

"No," Ben said. "You work in the rain. You were issued raincoats."

"Yes," Schlau said. "This is senseless. May I go?"

"You go to work in the morning. You take lunch in a hamper. You wear raincoats when it rains."

"We are talking nonsense," Schlau said. "I have stolen no radio. You know it is impossible, Herr Hoffman."

Ben leaned against the wall and jerked upright in sudden pain.

"It rains in the morning and stops sometimes. You take

your raincoats off. You eat your lunches from the basket. Ah yes," Ben said. "Yes!"

The prisoner smiled. "I have said nothing."

"You have said nothing," Ben said, admiringly. "You *are* clever!" He rose and said to the lieutenant, "They carry their lunches in a bushel basket and bring back the empty basket in the evening. When it rains they wear their raincoats. If the rain stops before they return, they take off the coats and throw them into the basket. The radio must have been under the raincoats."

"Ho!" the lieutenant said. "That does it!"

"What now?" Ben said.

"I'll have to take him into custody to face a federal charge. I'll give you a receipt."

"Schlau," Ben said, "go pack your things. Be at the gate in half an hour. I'm sending a guard with you. You must go with this man to face trial."

Schlau shrugged. "Why not? I have done nothing of which I am ashamed. I have stolen nothing."

"They will decide," Ben said.

The prisoner turned at the door. "Herr Hoffman, will this be in the newspapers?"

"I don't know," Ben said. "I hope not. If it is, people will know that we Americans have been stupid."

Schlau smiled. "Will you do me a favor? Save the clippings for me?"

Ben laughed. "I swear to you, Schlau, if it is in the papers, I will save and send to you every report. I wish you luck." He took Schlau into the orderly room. "Corporal, send a guard into the compound with Schlau. He's leaving with the lieutenant."

The lieutenant wrote out a receipt.

"You've got everything you need now," Ben said. "Motive. Access to the radio . . ."

"Yes," the young officer said. "We've established that. Our fault, Sergeant, as you've noted."

". . . and *modus operandi.*"

"Do you have a legal background?" the lieutenant said.

"No," Ben said. "I read a lot."

"The prisoners seem to like you."

"They do," Ben said. "Seem to. They've taught me a lot about friendship. They're satanic, in a way. They appeal for favors in the name of friendship. If I were to grant

the favors, they'd despise me. I'd be a tool and not a friend. I don't like generalities, Lieutenant, but I'd offer advice to anyone working with Germans. Learn the definition for *Pflicht*. Duty. German conscience and self-respect demand *fulfillment* of duty."

"You know a lot about them."

"I know little about them and I'll never know more as long as that barbed-wire fence stands."

"Well, Sergeant," the lieutenant said, "it keeps them safe."

"That fence locks me out," Ben said. "I see it every day and I still don't believe it."

The officer gave Ben the receipt and shook hands. "I'll wait for him by the gate, Sergeant. Thank you. If you ever get in trouble with the M.P.'s, I'll be glad to help you."

"Thanks, Lieutenant. Good-by."

Ben walked through the mess hall around the screen into office. His back was on fire and he twisted as he walked, the flesh pulling tight. He threw his shirt on the desk.

"Ben!" Walther leaped from his chair. "Your back is poison red! Such sunburn! Come with me!" He seized Ben's arm and pulled him into the mess hall. Ben followed him into the kitchen. "Take off your pants!"

Ben obeyed.

Broad-faced Hans, the German cook, looked at Ben's back and legs. "Oh, such a burn!" he said. *"Furchtbar!"*

"Lie down on the table," Walther said. Ben lay on his stomach on the wooden table, his head pillowed on his arms. Hans brought a bottle of vinegar. He poured the strong-smelling liquid on Ben's legs, patting gently. The flesh was cooled and soothed under the vinegar.

"Walther," Ben said, his voice muffled in his arms, "did you listen to that short-wave radio?"

"What short-wave radio, Ben?" Walther said. He held the bottle above Ben's back, pouring the vinegar in little puddles that Hans spread gently.

"Liar," Ben said comfortably, the raw flesh subsiding under the tender touch. "The one Schlau brought in."

"Ben," Walther laughed. "I am no liar."

Hans' broad fingers spread the vinegar over the waist and hips. Ben sighed. The liquid trickled down the small of his back into the crevice of his rump, between the cheeks. A gentle stinging sensation suddenly flared into raging pain.

Ben leaped from the table, hurtling against Walther. He

clapped his hands to the seat of his vinegar-wet shorts and yelled. He stood on one leg, twisting and turning to assuage the pain. He flexed the posterior muscles, closing the crevice against the stinging searing acid.

The two prisoners stood, watching him, their faces stiff with surprise. Ben leaped into the air at a knife-thrust of acid. The Germans looked at each other and laughed.

Walther said, his flushed face suddenly sober, "Ben, it was an accident. We are sorry. Lie down, we will finish treating the sunburn."

Ben looked at the two Germans. "It was?" he said.

"*Sicher,*" Hans said. "We are sorry."

Ben lay down on the wooden table.

CHAPTER TWELVE

AS Ben watched from the shack, the prisoners in shorts formed two lines before the gate. A burly German bounced the soccer ball on the ground. The sergeant unwound the chain and swung the wire frame open. The prisoners shouted and ran across the street to the exercise lot.

The burly German shouted and the two teams stood in the center of the lot, facing each other. The prisoner stood at the end of the two rows, looking down the center. He put the ball on the ground. The men stood at rigid attention.

"Sieg!" the burly German shouted.

The facing men shot out their arms, the Hitler salutes forming an arch.

"Heil!" they shouted and dropped their arms.

Sieg!"

The arms exploded forward. *"Heil!"*

"Sieg!"

"Heil!" The teams broke formation and ran to opposite sides of the field. Two men came to the center.

"Halt!" Ben shouted. He walked across the road to the field. The burly German walked to meet him.

"Would you answer a question?" Ben said. "I'm curious. The war is already lost. What are you sieg-heiling about?"

"Herr Hoffman," the German said. "We always begin our games this way."

"Hailing a Nazi victory? This is not the *Sportspalast.*"

"It is our custom, Herr Hoffman. Only a custom."

"O.K.," Ben said. "Thanks."

"A pleasure, Herr Hoffman. O.K.?"

"O.K."

Ben walked to the gate and rattled the chain. The sergeant came from the shack. He turned the key in the lock and said, "You're a grade A pain in the ass, Hoffman. Do you have to run back and forth in and out of that damn compound the

whole damn day? Why don't you get your own damn key?"

"And me a master sergeant, too," Ben said. "Haven't you got any respect?"

"Up your keester," the sergeant said, locking the gate behind Ben and walking away.

"Hey!" Ben said. The sergeant trudged back, wearily.

"What?"

Ben pulled a key ring from his pocket and held it up. "I do have a key."

The sergeant picked up a stone and threw it. The missile glanced from the wire. "You lazy bastard!"

"Duty," Ben said. "I don't want to deprive you of any function of your noble office, Keeper of the Gate."

The sergeant went into the shack and slammed the screen door.

Ben strolled through the clearing around the mess hall. He stood by the steps into the prisoner orderly room and knocked on the bottom of the door. The tall blond German company clerk opened the door and looked down at Ben.

"Hallo, Herr Hoffman," he said.

"Hello," Ben said. "Is Befehl there?"

"No, sir. He is in the day room attending an English lesson. Shall I call him?"

"No," Ben said. "I'll find him. Thanks."

"Nichts zu danken," the clerk said.

Ben entered the day room and walked to the back of the long room. The battered old radio played music softly to the wicker chairs and wooden table. No one was present.

Ben walked to a door at the end of the room and slipped in quietly. The prisoners looked up from their books. Tennyson stood before the blackboard, text in hand. "Hi, Sarge," he said. "Wanna take over awhile?"

"Go ahead, Tennyson," Ben said. "I want to see Befehl. Let's hear how you do this anyhow." He walked to the front of the room.

Tennyson held the book for Ben to see. Below a picture of a man seated at a table, large black letters said: "THE MAN WANTS TO EAT. HE ORDERS STEAK AND POTATOES FROM THE WAITER. THE STEAK IS BROILED. THE POTATOES ARE FRENCH FRIED."

"All right now, you fellas," Tennyson said. "Ah'm gon to read this to you all and then ah'm gon to get you to read it. Now lissen: 'The man wants t'eat. He orduhs steak'n potatas

fum th' waita. Th' steak is bro'led. Th' potatas are French frahd.' All right, Joe, you read it."

Josef rose, book in hand. " 'Der monn vantz teet,' " he said. " 'He oddass shteak und ptahtoss. Der shteak iss brullt. Der ptahtoss are Frransch frrahdt.' "

"That's all raht, boy," Tennyson said. "Thass good."

"Befehl," Ben said, "can I see you outside? Tennyson, you getting a dollar and a quarter an hour from the Red Cross for that?"

"You got it for me," Tennyson said. "This is gravy."

"That's right," Ben said. "You make good ridge runners out of all these men."

"Ah'll do my damnedest," Tennyson said.

The door closed behind them. "Befehl," Ben said, "we're having a company party tonight. Could we borrow the record player the Red Cross gave you? I'll bring it back tomorrow."

"*Natürlich,* Ben! You have no need to ask. It is here in the day room. I'll have one of the men take it over. Do you wish records also?"

"No," Ben said. "The men will want popular American records. We can get them from Special Services."

The portly German ran to a table and pulled an electric cord from the wall socket. He lifted the case by the handle. "I'll take it over for you, Ben."

"Thanks," Ben said. "I can carry it. You get back to your class. I'm sorry I interrupted you."

"Nothing," Befehl said. "Between you and me, Ben, I think I speak better English than he does."

Ben laughed. "Thanks, Befehl. I'll take good care of the record player."

Back in the office Walther looked up from the work form and said, "Ha, *Musik! Ja, gut.* Let us listen to some *singende, schwingende Musik.*"

"I didn't bring any records," Ben said. "I borrowed it for the party tonight."

"Oh, Ben," the German said. "Let us not waste the record player. Let me get some records for the while."

"Why not?" Ben said. "Go ahead."

Walther left the room whistling and Ben went into the orderly room and called Special Services to borrow six or seven albums of popular music. "Thanks," Ben said, "I'll send a driver over to pick them up."

Ben sat at his desk and checked Walther's entries on the

work form. Walther returned, two albums under his arm. He plugged in the player and slid a disc on the spindle. As the sound blared, Ben winced. The German turned the control knob and the lilt of a waltz lifted its skirts in the room. Walther sat at the card table and began to sway in his chair.

Ben leaned back, his eyes closing. *"Was schönres kann's geben?"* he said. The melody swept to a peak, halted, and drifted down. Ben leaned into the waltz and sang, *"Wien, Wien, nur Du allein, Sollst stets die Stadt meiner Träume sein."* Softly Walther picked it up, caressing the words, *"Dort wo die alten Häuser stehn, dort wo die liebliche Mädchen gehn."* The two voices joined, *"Wien, Wien, nur du allein sollst stets die Stadt meiner träume sein, dort wo ich glücklich und selig bin, ist Wien, mein Wien, mein Wien!"* The record whirled a flourish and stopped.

Walther sighed. "Vienna waltzes make the heart melt. Such music."

Ben said, "I like them. You ever been to Vienna, Walther?"

"Never, Ben."

"Me neither," Ben said.

The door from the captain's office opened. "The ice is here, Ben," the company clerk shouted.

"O.K." Ben said. "Walther, you finish up and go. It's time to quit, anyhow."

"In a short while, Ben."

Ben walked beside the mess hall toward the barracks. "Josef!" he called. "Josef!"

The orderly came from the latrine. *"Ja,* Herr Hoffman. *Was ist dir los, Mensch?"*

"Come with me, *Josef der Fauler.* We've got work to do."

"If I am lazy, Herr Hoffman, you are king of the lazy!"

Ben and Josef entered the kitchen. The mess sergeant gave them four huge metal tubs. "We want the *Eishacker,* too," Ben said.

"The what?" the sergeant said.

"The icepick," Ben said. "The icepick."

The two men carried the tubs to the side of the day room. Hundred-pound blocks of ice stood melting on the ground, wet burlap bags thrown over them. Ben helped Josef put a block into each tub and they carried them into the long recreation room.

Against the back wall were six cases of beer. "Chop up the ice," Ben said, "and put the bottles in the tub."

Josef patted the cases. "Real beer," he said.

"Real beer," Ben said. "And every bottle is counted."

The German opened up the top case. "Twenty-four bottles in each *Kasten.*"

"And six *Kasten,*" Ben said. "That makes one hundred and forty-three bottles."

"One hundred and forty-four, Herr Hoffman," Josef said.

"One hundred and forty-three," Ben said. "The opener is on the window sill. Lock the door and no one will see you."

Josef beamed. "Thank you, my friend," he said.

"Nothing," Ben said.

A voice shrilled thinly outside, "Ben! Ben!"

"What the hell now?" Ben said. He ran down the steps and around to the orderly room. The clerk stood in the door.

"M.P.'s want you on the phone."

Ben entered the office. "Sergeant Hoffman speaking."

"Ben?" the phone said. "There's a girl here in a convertible. Says her name is Virginia Laird. Wants to see you."

"Virginia Laird?" Ben said. "What does she want?"

"How do I know?" the phone said. "Wait a minute." The line was silent. "Hey," the phone said. "She says her father gets prisoners from you."

"I know," Ben said. "Tell her to park the car. I'll pick her up at the booth."

"Right," the phone said.

Ben drove the jeep to the entrance. Standing at the curbstone, the red-haired girl waited. She looked sullenly at Ben.

"Get in, Miss Laird," Ben said. He drove the jeep back to the company area and helped her from the machine. He held the door open to the mess hall and escorted her to his office. He switched on the light and pulled out Walther's chair.

"Sit down, Miss Laird," he said.

She sat in the chair, her face flushed. "Why didn't Rudi come out this morning?" she said.

"Rudi?" Ben said.

"You know who I mean. Rudi Schlau. He's in charge of the men who work on the farm."

"He's been transferred."

"It's my father," she said. "He told you not to send him out."

"No, Miss Laird. Your father has nothing to do with it."

The young girl shifted in the seat. Her eyes glistened. "You're lying," she said.

"I don't know you well enough to lie to you," Ben said.

She rose, clutching her handbag. "You won't let him come out because I treat him like a human being," she shouted.

"Miss Laird," Ben said, "do you go to college?"

"I told you I do!" she said.

"Schlau is in federal custody," Ben said. "He is charged with stealing an army radio. I'm sorry."

"No," she said. "That's a trick." She sat down and looked at Ben. Her voice softened. "Rudi told me about you. Honestly, he told me he likes you, even if you are Jewish."

"I've got nothing against him, either," Ben said. He offered her a cigarette and she shook her head convulsively. "Miss Laird, he won't be back."

She sobbed and took a handkerchief angrily from her bag.

"Those poor men," she said. "Those poor men. They aren't even allowed to talk to a girl."

Ben watched her. Those poor men, he thought, those poor men. What ails you, Virginia? You think sex is all bottled up in those men, ready to pop its cap? Maybe it's not sex. Maybe it's the *idea* you can't stand. Prison. Growing pains, Virginia?

"I'm glad you're interested, Miss Laird. I also hope you examine what you're told," Ben said.

She said nothing.

"You must be lonely on the plantation," Ben said. "We're having a party for the company tonight. Won't you stay and be our guest?"

"I am *not* lonely!" she said. She rubbed her chin jerkily with a knuckle. "Rudi *said* you hated him."

"I thought Rudi liked me."

"He does," she said. "You're from New York, aren't you?"

"Miss Laird," Ben said, "we're not all from New York and I did not send Rudi away. He stole something and he was caught. You're a pretty young lady and you embarrass me. Because if you keep on talking to me as if I were a monster I'm going to bust out crying and resign from the Army. You're being a fool and I don't like being forced to watch you. Schlau is thirty-five years old and you're what? Nineteen? He doesn't need your pity or anything else from you. Dry your eyes and go home."

"You!" she said. "You sneaking—"

"Watch it," Ben said. "Please. Do you want your father to know you chased over to the prison camp after a German prisoner? Do you want anybody to know? I respect you more than you respect yourself. You go home and forget about prisoners."

"I'm not ashamed!" she said. "They're nicer than you are."

"I could be very nice," Ben said. "If you'd give me a chance."

"Don't you just hate your job? Beating those men and all. You don't enjoy it, do you?"

"Miss Laird," Ben said, his voice dropping to a low register. "You're right. I don't like to be cruel. Nobody understands that. But you do, don't you?"

"I knew it," she said, leaning forward. "You really don't like it, do you?"

Ben stared at the desk. "No. If you knew how much I hate to do some of these things."

She said, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you."

"May I call you up sometimes?" Ben said. "I'd like to talk to you about the prisoners and the camp."

She rose and stretched forth her hand. "Surely," she said. "I'd love to hear about it."

Oh Virginia, Ben thought. Schlau and me: the science of manipulation. What a setup you and your tender heart are for a smart man. He held her hand and said, "I'll drive you back to the gate."

In the jeep she brushed her long red hair back from her face and said softly, "Ben?"

"Yes, Miss Laird?"

"My father says you're honest."

He left her at the gate and said, "Thank you for coming. Good-by."

"I'll see you later, Ben," she said. She walked to her car and backed it from the parking place. She drove away, smiling and waving.

If I hadn't asked Anne, Ben thought, I'd have made you stay for the party.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IN the long day room, the wicker chairs, tables and lamps were shoved against the walls and yellow corn meal was powdered on the board floor. On an oval table by the rear wall, crisp fried chicken was stacked in a deep pan. Slices of roast pork and boiled ham lined a metal tray. A plump army bologna lay on its side, a thin knife plunged into its casing. Sugared coffee cakes and tea buns bore a card: COMPLIMENTS OF THE BASE BAKERY. The beer bottles in the tubs thrust brown necks through the melting ice. On a table by the window sat the phonograph, lid held open, gushing sound. Men talked loudly, peering at each other through the drifts of cigarette smoke dim in the lights of the floor lamps.

Ben guided Anne through the noise. Corn meal gritted underfoot. In a wicker-woven chair by the wall a tiny girl sat, primly holding a glass. A fleshy soldier poured beer slowly from a bottle. He straightened, saw Ben and Anne, smiled and waved. He pulled close an empty chair and pointed.

"Hello," Manny said.

"Hello," Ben said.

Manny smiled slowly, tenderly. "You're so pretty," he said. "You must be Anne." He took the glass from the tiny girl's hand and pulled her to her feet. The girl fixed a smile on her face. "Honey, this is Anne and Ben. Meet Billie Jo, my fiancée."

Anne smiled, holding her hand out to the girl. "I'm glad to know you."

"Anne," Ben said. "This is Manny."

Manny put the glass down and held Anne's arm near the shoulder. His hand slid lightly down her arm to her elbow. "Sit down, Anne," he said. "We saved a chair just for you." She sat, looking surprised, and Manny leaned over her and

said softly, "What would you like? A glass of beer? Potato chips? A sandwich?"

Billie Jo stood, the smile fixed and blank. "Sit down Billie Jo," Ben said.

"A roast pork sandwich?" Manny said.

Ben hooked a finger into Manny's belt and pulled him away. "I'll take care of Anne, Manny. You put too much faith in sandwiches."

Manny laughed and sat on the arm of Billie Jo's chair. "Suspicious Hoffman," he said.

Ben took the glass from the sill and handed it to Billie Jo. "How do you like the party?"

The girl sat primly upright. "Oh, nice," she said. "Thank you. It's fun."

Men stood in groups along the wall, holding beer bottles and cigarettes. Two wives were in the hall.

"Where are the girls?" Ben said.

"The first sergeant took the command car over to the WAC camp to pick some up."

High above the noise the phonograph suddenly wailed, "You promised me love that would never die-e-e . . ."

"Where the hell did that record come from?" Ben said.

"Tennyson brought some of his folk music records," Manny said, smiling down at Billie Jo.

". . . That promise you made," the phonograph said dolefully, "was only a lie-e-e."

"Folk music," Ben said. "That would surprise Tennyson. He thinks it's hillbilly music."

Manny lifted Billie Jo's hand and fondled it. "It's authentic early American music," he said.

Billie Jo smiled blankly and briefly at Ben. "It's hillbilly music," she said. "It's pretty."

"It's hillbilly music," Anne said flatly.

"Well," Ben said, "that ought to settle that."

"Elizabethan ballads," Manny said. "Preserved pure through the years to our day."

The screen door opened and five women walked in, dressed in khaki skirts and khaki shirts and khaki ties, smiling uncertainly. A voice climbed waveringly through the smoke and sound from the back of the room. *"Bacallà!"*

"Raffia," Manny said, shaking his head. "That East Side ruffian."

"Ben," Anne said. "What's *bacallà?"*

"Codfish," Ben said uncomfortably.

"Why did he shout codfish?"

"I don't know, Anne," Ben said. "Raffia is always shouting something."

The first sergeant followed the women through the door and, taking one by the elbow, led them to the buffet table in the rear. Men emerged from the walls and walked after them. The music stopped. Tennyson stood by the phonograph, changing the records. The group by the buffet swelled, jostling and loud.

The music started. Couples detached themselves from the table and began to dance. The melody was slow and rhythmic and the floor shook under the moving feet.

"That's funny." Anne nodded toward Pancho, dancing closely with a short, dark-haired WAC. "They look like one person in this light. Both of them in the light tan uniforms."

"Androgynes," Ben said. "That's what we were before we were men and women. Just one big animal."

"Androgynes and the lion?"

Ben laughed. "That's somebody else."

"Androgynes and the lion?"

"I'll give up trying to impress you," Ben said. "I've already used up all the mythology I know."

"I know what androgynes are," Anne smiled. "Plato says men and women need each other to complete the single animal they once were."

"The two-backed beast?" Ben said.

"And that's Shakespeare."

"That's brutal," Ben said. "You've worn out all the clever allusions I own. Shall we dance?"

Her hair was fragrant and soft beneath his cheek. Quiet, surrendered, she moved, pressing close, breasts rounding into his chest. Her head against his shoulder, she obeyed the music through his body.

Nice, Ben thought. An essence. Very real. He moved in the flow of the melody, the warmth of her flesh a harmony that flowed with the melody that warmed him. Without thought, he was the music and she was he in the music that merged them.

The music swelled, held, and expired.

Ben stood still on the meal-covered floor, holding Anne tightly for the moment.

He walked from the floor hand in hand with her, feeling eased and relaxed. Her palm was warm against his.

"You dance well, Ben," she said.

"With you, Anne, I do."

They sat in the wicker chairs, smiling. Tennyson stopped before them, smiling vaguely. "Ben," he said. "You'n the lil lady ain drink'n." He fumbled at a bulge in his belt and brought out a bottle. "Lil lady is suthn lady sh'd have a drink." He unscrewed the top and shouted, "Hole out y'glasses!"

Anne laughed. Ben held out the glasses and Tennyson splashed whisky into them. "There!" he said and wandered away.

"Want anything with it?" Ben said.

"No," she said. "I'll try strangling on this."

Ben drank, the sharp alcohol cutting through the sluggish fog of beer. "How do you like your job, Anne?"

"I don't, Ben. You men are lucky."

"Lucky?"

"It's hateful to say it, I know. But even if it's war you go to, you don't have to be trapped in one place like I am. Doing the same thing day after day. Every day like the day before. Knowing that tomorrow will be the same as yesterday."

Ben looked closely at the girl. "I know," he said. "I know what you mean. The same job, the same people, and life just dripping away drop by drop every day."

"Oh, Ben. That's it. I'm so futile. I chase my own tail like a dog."

"A pretty tail it is," Ben murmured.

"To tell you the truth, Ben, I hoped you would call me. You're different from the fretful, petty people I know. They bore me."

"I wanted to call you." And we're off, Ben thought. I'll give you a lot of sympathy. Home is so boring. The front steps need painting. The kid sister crayoned the wallpaper. The folks are worried about the mortgage. Your world is cramped and closeted. There is *so* much to see, to feel, to smell, to know in the world. Oh, yes, you stick with Ben. "But I was afraid you'd think I was fresh."

"You afraid? I don't believe you, Ben."

"I wanted to see you," Ben said. "I'm bashful."

"Life is so pale this way. Everyone is doing something ex-

citing, and I go to my job every day and come home every day. I'm like a ghost. A daytime ghost."

"A daytime ghost," Ben said. "That's a beautiful image, honey. Do you write poetry?"

"Yes, I do, Ben. I don't know how good it is, but I do, sometimes."

"Could I see them?"

"Oh, I'd be flattered, Ben. Do you write poetry?"

"No, I don't. I usually dislike poetry. Unless it's sincere. I think yours would be sincere."

Anne sipped the whisky. "Thank you, Ben."

Ben put his hand on hers. She wriggled her fingers to interlace his and smiled. I like you, Ben thought, and I'm going to like this evening. She breathed deeply, full bodice moving. "You better drink this, Ben. I'm not used to whisky."

Ben said ominously, "I might lose control of myself."

"Well," she said, considering. "That would be better than my losing control of myself, wouldn't it?"

"You drink it," Ben said, "and maybe we'll lose control together."

"That's promising," she said. "Your health." She drained the glass. Oh yes, Ben thought, now we're entering the dangerous conversation phase. Promising.

"I'll get you a sandwich," Ben said.

"I'm not hungry, Ben. Let's talk."

"And a beer to talk over."

She laughed. "Go ahead. You will anyhow."

The music roared again and a nasal voice raced against an electric guitar. "Aha!" a voice screamed. Walking back toward the buffet, Ben turned. Tennyson danced a furious jig, alone in the middle of the floor, waving his bottle.

Ben bumped against the first sergeant at the table. The sergeant had a slender WAC by the arm. She was beaming at him. "Parron me," the sergeant said. "Oh, it's you, Hoffman old man. 'Joy y'self."

"Thanks," Ben said.

He spread mustard on bread and speared a slice of roast pork. A hand touched his arm. A plump woman stood beside him, her khaki tie pulled down and the first two buttons of her khaki shirt undone.

"Sergeant," she said accusingly, "I thought this party was for the prisoners."

"For the prisoners!" Ben said.

"Yes," the woman said. "Your first sergeant said it was for the prisoner-of-war men."

"I'm sorry, honey," Ben said. "We're the prisoner-of-war men."

The woman leaned over the tub and pulled out a bottle of beer. "He should have made that clear," she said. "He should have been specific."

Ben lifted the bottle from her hand and snapped the cap off with the metal opener. "Wouldn't you have come?" he said, pouring the amber into a glass.

"I would *not!*"

"I'll be a son of a bitch," Ben said, handing her the glass.

The woman drank half the glass, suds beading her upper lip. "I expect that kind of language," she said. "Soldiers have no respect."

"You're a soldier," Ben said.

"A woman soldier."

"The Germans are soldiers," Ben said.

"They don't say things like that in front of a woman."

"How do you know?"

"I've worked with them in the hospital and they're very gentlemanly."

"You understand German?"

"No." The khaki-skirted woman up-ended the glass. Ben stared at her and reached down and pulled up another bottle and opened it and poured it into the glass she held before her.

"How do you know what they say?" Ben asked.

"Those poor men," she said, turning over a slice of boiled ham with the fork.

Ben made the sandwich in his hand and held it toward her.

"Thanks," she said. "Why don't they run away? Aren't you afraid they'll escape? You're all here getting drunk and those poor men lonely in the prison."

"Don't let that worry you, honey. We've got men on the towers."

"Don't call me honey," she said. "If I was locked in there with no love I'd walk out past you candy soldiers."

"Oh, my," Ben said.

"I'd escape. I'd get free and live like a decent person with love and respect."

"I love you, honey," Ben said. "I respect you."

"Don't call me honey," she said. "I'd escape."

"What ails you, honey?" Ben said. "Escape where? They're free inside there. Outside they'd be hunted down like dogs. They wouldn't draw a free breath. Here they're eating better than they ever did. We faithful guards bring them food sure and steady; we guard them against harm. They play, they sing, they learn. Why escape? Where escape? They have to want to escape. People don't make a break without a reason."

The woman washed down a mouthful of sandwich. She undid the third button of her shirt. Her skin shone with sweat.

"Locked up!" she said.

"Don't you like the Army?" Ben said.

The woman put the glass on the table and turned to face Ben, her hands firmly on her broad hips. "No," she said loudly. "I do not."

"Get pregnant," Ben said. "They'll discharge you."

The woman watched while he made another sandwich. "I'm thinking about it," she said.

"I really must go now." Ben bowed before the woman in khaki. "Do forgive me." He turned from the WAC and threaded his way through the dancers and the smoke and the music to Anne.

He pulled the chairs close to an open window in the dimness and they sat and talked, drinking the beer slowly. The noise of the dance floor and the phonograph seemed to grow louder and louder and they moved close to each other, talking, faces almost touching.

Pancho materialized from the swirling crowd, his wavy black hair shining. "Ben," he said, "may I speak to your lady?"

"*Si, Caballero,*" Ben said.

"I would consider it an honor," Pancho said to Anne, "if you would consent to dance with me."

She looked at Ben and he smiled. She rose and accepted Pancho's hand. "Pancho is grateful," Pancho said.

Ben rose. "Anne," he said, "I have to go to my office. I'll be back soon."

"All right, Ben. Hurry back."

"I will guard her," Pancho said. "With my life."

Ben stood, watching the slender Pancho and the full-skirted Anne dancing. He walked to the rear of the room,

picked up three chilled bottles of beer and a metal opener and slipped out the side door.

The company clerk sat in the dimly lit office. "I thought somebody was going to relieve me," he said. Ben put the bottles of beer on the desk and said, "Go ahead over for a while. But you come back in five minutes or persuade somebody to take your place."

"O.K., Ben." The clerk went out the screen door.

Ben cranked the compound phone, holding the receiver to his ear.

"Befehl?" he said. "Come over to the orderly room. Bring Walther Urleid with you."

The receiver squawked.

"No," Ben said. "Nothing's wrong. Come over."

He hung up and walked through the captain's office into the mess hall. He lifted the barrier and walked into the kitchen. He rinsed three glasses, dried them and brought them back to the orderly room. He ranged the bottles on the desk, a clean glass before each bottle.

Befehl burst through the door. "Herr Hoffman!" he said. "Everything is in order. *Was geschah?*"

Walther walked in calmly. "Hello, Ben," he said.

Ben stood, looking at the two men. He handed the florid German the metal opener and pointed at the desk. Befehl pivoted. Moisture gleamed on the bottles, reflecting the desk light.

"Bier!" Befehl said.

"Bier," Walther said.

"Yes," Ben said. "Open them up and we'll drink."

"Not since four years," Befehl said quietly, "have I tasted beer."

"We didn't believe Josef," Walther said. "We thought he was dreaming."

"There are not enough bottles of beer for the compound," Ben said. "Josef talks too much."

Befehl, his face beaming, levered the tops from the bottles, the caps spinning across the room.

"We appreciate that you share your party with us," Walther said. Befehl poured and handed a glass to Ben and to Walther and held his own aloft.

"Sieg heil!" Befehl said, smiling.

"I'll be damned," Ben said.

"Pardon," Befehl said. "It is a joke. Lift your glasses high *und trink, brüderlein, trink! Prosit!*"

"Prosit!"

"Prosit!"

The Germans drank deeply and sighed. "It is good, Ben. Good," Befehl said.

"We need now only women," Walther laughed.

"Beer I can provide," Ben said. "But we have a word in English for men who provide women."

"There is a word in German, too," Befehl said.

"Kuppler," Ben said.

Walther put his finger to his nose and squinted shrewdly. "A *Kuppler* could make much money with us, Ben."

Ben laughed. "Money. You mean canteen coupons."

"Sixty cents a day," Walther said. "By two hundred and fifty a day. That is fifteen thousand cents a day. That is one hundred and fifty dollars, Ben."

"Nuts," Ben said.

"A joke." Befehl poured more beer into his glass. "A cruel joke."

"Well," Walther said. *"Meide den Kummer und meide den Schmerz.* Forget your troubles, forget your pains. The old song gives good advice. Drink."

"Dann ist das Leben ein Scherz," the fat German said. "Life would be a joy. I haven't seen my wife for five years. Bitter."

Ben said, "I bet you have the snapshot of your wife and kids in your breast pocket, don't you, Befehl?"

"I do," the German said.

"Well," Ben said. "The beer was just an idea."

"Ben!" Walther said. "We are grateful for the beer!"

"No," Ben said. "There was plenty of beer."

"Ben," Walther said. "You understand. The nights are evil to us. We are warmed that you think of us. But we are ashamed, too, sometimes, you understand."

"Ashamed of what?" Ben said.

"I pray," the florid German sergeant said, "to the good God that we can buy for you a beer very soon, Ben."

"You will go home soon," Ben said. "And I will come to Germany. And I will not settle for a beer. I will expect roast goose and dumplings and Kirsch and Rhine wine and asparagus hollandaise and *alles was gut ist.*"

Befehl laughed. "Agreed!" He thrust forth his hand. Ben shook hands with him and with Walther.

"Until tomorrow," Walther said.

"Until tomorrow."

He walked with the Germans to the gate. "Back to the barbed wire," Walther said. "I hope the Big Three will find an agreement to preserve the world for another war."

"Your English is good," Ben said, "but that should have been 'preserve the world *from* another war,' Walther."

Ben walked, alone in the dark, across the yard to the day room. Music blared from the windows. A woman's laugh cut shrilly above the loud voices.

He waited in the chair by the window. Anne was dancing with Manny. The floor shook under the dancers' feet. The long room was hot and fogged with smoke. Ben leaned back and his outthrust foot struck an empty beer bottle, rolling it across the meal-strewn boards. He rose, picked up the bottle and put it on the window sill.

The music ended and Manny stood talking to Anne, holding her hand. Ben shouted and waved. Anne crossed the floor.

"Whew," she said, breathless, "Manny's a fast dancer."

"Manny's fast, all right," Ben said.

They looked up at a sharp explosive sound. The room fell into stillness.

A slender WAC stood on the dance floor, her hands on her hips, her bosom heaving. The first sergeant stood before her, staring, a white patch on his cheek reddening in the haze.

"Who the hell you think you are!" the WAC yelled.

Looking old and chastened, the sergeant walked to the buffet table, opened a bottle of beer and slowly and deliberately poured the amber fluid into a glass. He waited for the foam to subside, took the glass over and threw it in the WAC's face.

The woman looked at the sergeant unbelievingly, suds dripping from her face, a wet tendril of hair hanging over an eye. The soaked shirt clung to her, outlining the bra beneath.

"You!" she said. Her mouth closed and her cheeks swelled. Her face became livid, and tears rolled down with the beer. "You!"

Two women ran and pulled her to a chair. Murmuring,

they wiped her face with handkerchiefs. The first sergeant returned to the buffet, opened another bottle and drank.

Anne turned a shocked face to Ben. He stopped laughing and drew a deep breath. "Don't worry, Anne," he said. "This is situation normal for the outfit." He saw a WAC sergeant striding across the floor to the table. "Pardon me, Anne," he said, and walked swiftly to cut off the woman.

"Please," he said to the stocky sergeant. "We're very sorry about all this. I'm Sergeant Hoffman. The company apologizes for his rude behavior. Please tell the young lady we're sorry."

"I'm taking the girls home!" the woman said.

"Don't," Ben said. "The rest of us are embarrassed by this and we'd be very grateful if you'd stay and let us make it up to you."

"Well," she said. "You talk to Betsy." Ben followed her to the group of women about the chair.

"Miss," Ben said to the girl in the chair. "We're sorry about his rudeness. Please don't leave. The rest of the company is grateful to you and to the other ladies for coming to the party."

"Don't worry, Sergeant," the girl said tightly. "We're not leaving."

"Thank you," Ben said. "And thank you, ladies. May I bring you something? Would you like coffee?"

"That's all right, Sergeant," the girl said. "We don't want anything. We're not leaving. Yet."

He returned to Anne and sat down.

"What did he do?" Anne said.

"I was afraid to ask," Ben said.

Raffia paused before their chair. "Ben!" he said, swaying unsteadily, his voice rising in a howl. "I've got to go *bacause!*"

"Ba-kow-se?" Ben said. "If that means what I think it does, I got to go, too. Pardon me, won't you, Anne?"

"Certainly," she said. "You might inquire about equal facilities for women, Ben."

"Oh, Anne, I'm sorry," Ben said. "I should have thought. The officers'—uh, facilities—have been set aside for the ladies. Come on, I'll show you."

"There's no urgency," she smiled. "I'll be here when you get back."

"I'll be right back, Anne," he said.

Walking across the yard, Raffia said, *"Bacallà,* plenty of *bacallà* tonight! That's a pretty piece you got, Ben."

"Thanks, Raffia."

"Boy, I'm getting high! This is my third trip *bacause* tonight."

"Is *bacause* bathroom in Italian, Raffia? I'll have to remember that."

"Ha! Ha!" Raffia yelled. "I thought you was smart!"

"What's the matter," Ben said.

"Italian!" Raffia said. "That's American wop."

"Bacause?" Ben said.

"Sure," Raffia said. "When them old guineas come to this country they had to go to the backhouse."

"Backhouse?" Ben said.

"Sure," Raffia yelled. *"Bacause!"*

On the floor of the latrine were empty wine and whisky bottles. Ben pushed them against the wall with his foot. "I hope nobody gets hurt tonight."

Raffia ruffled his black hair, peering into the mirror. "Hello," he shouted. "You're going to get laid tonight, handsome!" He put his finger against the glass, touching his reflected nose.

Ben stood at the trough. "Raffia," he said, "why don't you admit you're faithful to your wife? You talk loudly and carry a limp stick. I've been out with you."

"Your mother's face," Raffia said, taking up a position at the trough. "Don't talk about my wife."

"You're a good man," Ben said, buttoning his trousers.

"Give me any lip," Raffia said, "I'll bust you and that first sergeant in the mouth."

"Me?" Ben said.

"You talk too much," Raffia said sullenly. "Anybody talk to you and you jump in the air, flapping them stripes. You don't care what you say to other people."

"Two beers," Ben said, "and Raffia fights the world."

"My wife wants to come here."

"Good!" Ben said. "When she coming?"

"With three kids?" Raffia yelled. "Where in the hell she going to get the money! Crazy!"

Ben washed his hands. "Let's go back, Raffia."

"I didn't even have enough money to buy a pint for tonight."

Ben took a key from his pocket. "Here," he said. "This

opens my foot locker. There's a pint under the tray. Take it and enjoy yourself."

"*Maron!*" Raffia said. "Thanks." He left Ben at the boardwalk and ran toward the barracks. Ben walked slowly toward the day room and entered.

Anne sat in the chair by the window. "This party is getting wild," she said. "Somebody just sailed a record across the floor."

"Did anybody disturb you?" Ben said.

"Oh, no."

"If you'd like, Anne," Ben said, "I'll show you the ladies' room."

"Let's go."

Ben held the screen door and they walked down the steps. The officers' latrine was a converted hutment near the mess hall. Ben lit a cigarette in the dark, waiting, looking across the road at the quiet village behind the barbed wire. Behind him the day room blared and yelled. In the warm night the towers sent a blanket of thin light along the fences. He smoked quietly, watching the peaceful compound.

"All right, Ben," she said. She put her hand through his arm and pressed against him. They strolled in the darkness along the boardwalk. She stopped before the steps, pulled his face down and kissed him. Ben blinked and followed her up the steps.

In the doorway she halted. "Look!"

Tennyson, clutching the empty bottle with one hand, held Billie Jo's arm in the other. The tiny girl was smiling at him desperately. Manny ran pounding across the dance floor from the phonograph. The fat soldier spun Tennyson around and hit him in the mouth with his fist.

Tennyson sprawled, the bottle shattering on the floor. He leaned on an elbow, shaking his head. He looked at the broken bottleneck in his hand. "Son of a bitch," he said. He clambered to his feet and rushed at Manny, holding the jagged glass like a knife. Manny pushed Billie Jo behind him and stood solidly. Women screamed and two men leaped to hold the struggling Tennyson.

The slender WAC picked up a table lamp and walked behind the first sergeant and broke it over his head.

He roared and the WAC hit him again with the piece in her hand. The room exploded. A man stood between Manny and Tennyson and Manny swept him aside. The plump

WAC who had eaten Ben's sandwich yanked a floor lamp from the wall socket and swung it.

"Well," Ben said to Anne in the doorway. "Let's leave." He pulled her down the steps, took her arm, and guided her in the dark over the boardwalk to the yard.

"I've never gone to a party like this in my life," she said.

"If we're lucky," Ben said, "we'll never go again."

Shrieks and howls came from the day room and suddenly all the windows went black.

Ben stood in the yard, looking about him. Anne leaned against him.

"Here," Ben said. "Get into the ambulance." He opened the front door, folded the seat forward, and leaned in to lower the wall seat. "Get in back and sit there until we leave the base." He held the door open.

She brushed a kiss against his cheek in the blackness and climbed in. Ben smiled, went around to the other door, and slipped into the driver's seat. He warmed the motor and drove the vehicle from the yard in the blackness. He flipped on the lights a block away and drove to the gate.

The M.P. came from the booth and said in a bored voice, "Trip ticket."

Ben leaned forward and opened the dash compartment. He pulled out a paper and waved it.

"Oh, it's you, Ben. Where the hell you going this time of night in an ambulance?"

"I have to pick up somebody in town."

"In an ambulance?"

"I like the ambulance," Ben said.

"Go ahead. You guys got your pick of everything."

Ben laughed and shifted gears. The vehicle rolled slowly away. On the highway, he pulled over to the shoulder and said, "Come up front, Anne."

She climbed awkwardly into the front seat.

"Anne," Ben said. "Honey. I didn't mean to expose you to a brawl like that."

She laughed. "It was exciting. And I'm not surprised. Your prisoners tell me you're a violent man."

"Me?" Ben said. "I didn't do anything but run."

"I heard you crushed a man's skull with a club. The prisoners say you're a fair man. They like you."

"Do you like me?" Ben said.

She laid her hand lightly on his knee.

"I do, Ben."

"And you think I crushed a man's skull?"

"If it was necessary."

Ben drove onto the road. "Tell me where you live."

She moved close to him, her hand resting on his knee. Through the khaki pants the touch burned. Whisky and beer were lazy and smoky in his flesh.

"Turn left at the next side road," she said.

The flat heavy tires of the ambulance moaned against the asphalt. The road was narrow and deserted. They rode without words. In the dim light of the dash bulb, she brushed falling hair back from her cheek.

"What is that puppy's name, Ben?"

"Mutti," he said.

"They told me it means sweetheart," she said.

"I think it does."

Her lips were on his cheek, held there soft and unmoving. "*Mutti,*" she whispered.

Gnarled live oaks tunneled the road, overarching limbs grizzled and hoary with gray Spanish moss. In the moving beam of the headlights, the ghostly streamers hung.

He put his arm about her body, not looking at her. She shifted, moving her breast into the cup of his hand.

Ben chuckled to himself. She doesn't give me time to do anything. All I have to do is sit still and fall victim. The girl really practices equal rights. She'd probably open doors for me."

Maybe she's a nymphomaniac. Every soldier's dream.

Maybe she really likes me. Maybe she's completely honest.

Don't flatter yourself.

His fingers moved slowly and lingeringly, pressing gratefully into the soft, silk-covered flesh.

"I wouldn't use a club," he said. "Prisoners lie."

"Yes, you would," she whispered against his face. "Yes, you would!"

He pressed his cheek against her hair, feeling her warm breath. He put his hand into the open neck of her blouse, touching her throat. On a filigreed chain a medallion hung above her breasts. In the hot Carolina night, the silk blouse was cool against the warm flesh.

"We'll soon be home," she said. "My parents are there."

"Oh?" Ben said.

Ahead, a rutted path angled into the dark wood. He

swung the large wheel with both hands, drove onto the dirt road. He turned the ignition key, pushed the light switch, and the night rushed in. He sat in the blackness, his hands on the wheel.

Her hand closed on his arm. He put his arms about her, locking her in his strength. He found her in the dark and kissed her brutally, her lips parting in pain against her teeth, her tongue hesitating and exploring. She pushed against his chest, and Ben took his face from hers, lingering to kiss gently the lips once more soft.

Her hand fell to his lap, moving slowly, her fingers pushing, stopped by the web belt.

Ben stared blindly in the darkness. Then he grasped the back of the seat and pulled it down.

"In back," he said. "Honey, in back?"

She murmured and kissed his ear. He grasped her arms and thrust her over the folded seat, sliding like a sack of meal to the ambulance floor.

Ben followed her over the seat and lay beside her, lifting her head to rest on his arm. She moved tightly against him, burrowing her head against his neck and shoulder.

He moved the palms of his hands under her skirt, the rounded thighs twitching under his touch. The floor of the ambulance was hard and ridged with iron. She moaned and pushed against him.

In the blackness of the walled ambulance, they moved together, the hard strong springs of the vehicle shaking gently. Anne moved against him compulsively, in a cycle beyond will, moaning, her fingernails raking his shirt, seizing the tight flesh of his back in desperate hands. Finally she subsided, whimpering, kissing his face again and again as he lay, her breast soft under him, drained and justified and triumphant.

A breeze touched his bare thighs and he was aware of the socks and heavy shoes on his feet and the sweated shirt on his back. He thought, she wore no underpants, she planned it.

He rested, holding her in his arms, submissive, relaxed. What is it? he thought. No contraceptive. What does she want? I always think it's a responsibility. It's always so important to me. I didn't do it. She did it. To her it's an enjoyment. Like going to the movies. For her tomorrow somebody else. It wasn't virgin. You're not that much of a man

to have a child every time. I always make such a big deal.

She lay heavily in his arms, inert, her skin clammy with sweat.

"Anne," he said. "Get up."

"My dear," she said. "My sweetheart."

"Get up," Ben said. "You better take care of yourself."

"My lover," she said.

"I didn't use anything," Ben said patiently.

"I love you, Ben."

Brother, Ben thought, that's all. She probably has a fitted diaphragm. She's not worried.

"You're wonderful," Ben said. "Lovely and sweet and gracious. Darling Anne."

He kissed her and helped her into the front seat. He started the motor and switched on the lights, the brilliance startling in the black forest. He backed the ambulance onto the main road.

Anne sat close to him, huddled under his arm. She spoke little, content, murmuring, wriggling like a puppy against his body.

"I live at the next farmhouse, sweetheart," she said.

"All right," Ben said. "I'll park on the road and walk you to the house. Your folks might think it funny if we rode up in an ambulance."

Anne giggled.

He kissed her at the doorstep. She clung to him. "You'll call," she said.

"Sure," Ben said. "I'll see you at your office, honey."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes," Ben said. "Tomorrow."

A loud grunt sounded across the dark yard. "What's that?" Ben whispered.

Anne giggled. "Pigs," she whispered. "Daddy cross-breeds hogs for the university."

He walked in the dark to the ambulance on the shoulder of the road.

He drove along the tunnel of leafy oaks. I wonder, he thought, what it's like if you love a girl. He sat forward and his shirt pulled stickily from the canvas seat. He reached to touch the back of his shirt. The cloth was torn and gummy against his body. Under the dim dashlight, he looked at his fingers. Dark red blood.

"That vixen!" he said.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BEN halted the ambulance. He climbed from the cab, looked about the crossroads in the glare of the headlights. No signpost. No arrow. He swung from the running board into the seat and shifted the gear. The ambulance picked up speed, rolling into the night. Moss streamers moved into the light stream, faded into black above. Three hours, he thought. Anne's house was what?—twenty miles from the base. Which way. The ambulance running low on gas and me and the night and dead moss dripping from trees. No sign to name a place. Three crossroads now. No arrow to point a way.

Hell with it, he thought.

He hit the switch and the headlight button, pulled and locked the handbrake. Heat flowed through the floor from the motor tapping and cooling. He crawled into the ambulance body and lay loose-limbed on the boards. He pillowed his head on his arm, squirmed on the metal ridges, and slept.

Night had paled in the ambulance. Ben woke, sweating, in the predawn mist. Not moving, he saw the canvas-covered hanging bench above his head, the metal chamber above him, the riveted ridge against his face. Frightened, he sat upright, a sudden cramp jerking his arm against his body. He rubbed the muscle, remembering the place and the time.

He climbed awkwardly over the seat and stepped outside the ambulance. He stood and stretched. Night was vaporizing, misting away, and faint color was flushing the sky. He urinated against the front tire. Why? he wondered. In all this countryside, why against the tire I have to take back with me?

He rubbed his face sleepily with his free hand.

You dog, he thought affectionately.

He swung into the cab, started the motor. Fifteen minutes

later a stop sign warned him of a crossing. He swung left on the main highway that passed the air base.

"Of course," Ben said. "I wasn't five miles from camp. Lost in the uncharted wilds of Geecheeland."

When he parked in the company yard in the early dawn, the area was still and deserted. Josef came from the latrine, mop in hand. He started at Ben climbing stiffly from the cab.

"Was—?" the German said.

"Was yourself," Ben said. *"Guten Morgen, Josef. Wie geht's?"*

"Thank you," Josef said in German. "What are you doing so early out of bed and riding in the sick wagon?"

"Ask me later, *Gumpel,"* Ben said. "Maybe I'll think of an answer."

He went into the barracks, walking quietly. Men slept, shifting in the bunks. He gathered up his toilet kit, clean clothes and a towel. Manny, sleeping by the screen door, made a baby noise in his throat. Ben closed the door softly and stepped onto the slats, walking in the fresh morning air to the latrine.

He showered, turning on the faucets full force, standing with folded arms under the stinging driving needle spray. He soaped and washed and rinsed.

He scrubbed his skin with the rough towel. Josef entered and put the mop in a corner. He stood watching Ben. Taking the comb from the pants pocket, Ben stood naked at a sink, combing his hair slowly and carefully in the mirror.

Josef smiled. Ben wiped the comb thoroughly with the towel and laid it on the shelf. The German went out the screen door. *"Mahlzeit,"* he said. "I go to drink another cup of coffee."

"Mahlzeit," Ben said.

He dressed in fresh khakis and returned to the barracks. He thrust the soiled underwear and khaki pants into the laundry bag. The ripped khaki shirt he rolled into a bundle and tucked under his arm. He entered the mess hall by the side door, went into his office and put the shirt on the desk. Yawning, he walked into the kitchen.

The German cooks hailed him. Josef was leaning against the meat block, drinking coffee from a thick mug. Wizened Otto poured grapefruit juice and handed the glass to Ben.

"*Na,* Ben," the cook said, "drink this. It is good for the *Katzenjammer.*"

"*Katzenjammer?*" Ben said. "Why should I have *Katzenjammer?*" He drank the juice. "Woof!" he said. "That does it."

Broad-faced Hans laughed. "After such a party you had last night, you will all have *Katzenjammer.* Josef here says that the beer was very good."

"How would Josef know?" Ben said. "Unless he were a thief?"

Hans reached a dipper into the great vat on the stove and poured black coffee into a mug. Ben cupped his hands about the thick porcelain.

Josef laughed. "When there is a party, who denies a man a bottle of beer?"

"Has anyone been in yet this morning?" Ben said.

Otto dried his hands on his apron. "Only Tennyson," he said. "And he would not eat. We gave him a piece of raw steak."

"A piece of raw steak?" Ben said. "For breakfast?"

Otto chuckled evilly. "Not for his breakfast. For his eye."

"Oh?" Ben said.

"A beautiful eye," the wizened dark-faced German said. "A truly beautiful eye. An eye as deep and true in beauty as the rainbow. Prismatic. Harmonic. An eye to bring reverence to the heart of the beholder." He closed his eyes and held his hand over his heart. He swayed slightly. "An eye," he said. "An eye—"

"Don't get carried away," Ben said. "What happened?"

"I asked him," Otto said, "and he told me to shut my damn mouth."

"Bad manners," Ben said.

"Oh, it is nothing," Otto said. He waved his hand graciously. "I forgive him."

"Well," Ben said, drinking the hot coffee, "your question was not diplomatic."

"Exactly," Otto said. "If one is to blame, both are to blame. I free-willingly admit that my curiosity deserved his answer."

Ben put the cup in the sink. "Two things make life worthwhile," he said. "Curiosity and courtesy."

"Right!" Otto said. "Exact! I was lacking in courtesy."

"Manny did it," Ben said. "They fought."

"The fat one!" Hans said. "The gentle fat one?"

"The fat one is a warrior," Ben said. "In defense of a lady."

"Eggs?" Otto asked.

"Sunnyside up," Ben said.

"Na," Otto said. "So Tennyson was struck by the fat Manny." He broke the shells over the grille and fat popped, yellow islands floating in private seas of crisp-edged white.

"You like gossip?" Ben said.

Otto fitted a poker into a stove lid and set it aside. He skewered a bread slice on a long fork and held it over the glowing coals. He shrugged. "Curiosity," he said. He turned the fork, toasted the other side, and held it out to Ben.

Standing at the counter, Ben ate. He wiped his mouth with a paper napkin Hans gave him, threw it in the stove, and went into his office.

He took the rolled shirt from the desk and walked through the mess hall out the side door and across the yard to the supply room.

"Hello, Starcek," Ben said, laying the shirt on the railing. The giant supply sergeant seated at the desk lifted his heavy head and looked at him. He shifted a wad in his cheek, bent his head, and spat into a coffee tin on the floor. "Umh," he said.

"My shirt's torn," Ben said. "I want to trade it in on a new one."

The man rose ponderously and lifted the shirt from the railing. He inspected it carefully, folded it and laid it back. "No," he said.

"Come on," Ben said. "I've only got two khaki shirts. You're supposed to replace them when they're worn."

"Worn," the heavy-set man said. "Not torn."

"Where were you last night?" Ben said. "The party missed you."

"Home." Starcek sat slowly.

"Fifteen neck and thirty-four sleeve," Ben said.

"No," the supply sergeant said.

"Starcek!" Ben said. "I've only got two shirts. This will leave me one. What'll I do, wear one shirt day in, day out?"

"Regulations," Starcek said. "Worn. Not torn."

"I want a shirt to wear," Ben said. "Not to sell in town. Not to save for civilian life. To wear."

"No," Starcek said.

Ben put his hand on the railing. "Starcek, you got a car. Right?"

"Umh," Starcek said.

"That car is lined with army blankets. Ceiling, upholstery, everything."

"X blankets," the heavy man said. "Used excess blankets. No memo receipt on those."

"No," Ben said. "Three USA markings on the ceiling alone. Every time you drive through the gate I shiver. And who put those blankets on your seats? A professional upholsterer. A German prisoner."

"I gave him a carton cigarettes," Starcek said.

"And now you can't replace my shirt."

"Got to be worn through. Not torn."

"You take home shirts and pants with the tags still on them. You won't buy a pair of pants for ten years after you get out of the Army. You think I don't know you scrub the P marking off the prisoners' khakis and trade them in for new ones? You think the prisoners don't know it?"

Starcek shifted his bulk and spat into the sand-filled coffee can. "What size?"

"Fifteen thirty-four."

Starcek brought a folded shirt from the shelf.

"Thank you," Ben said.

"You're welcome," Starcek said. "I'll have to rub that tear with a stone to make it worn."

"Throw it in the fire," Ben said. "Stock depreciation."

He carried the shirt to the barracks and put it in his footlocker. He returned to his office and spoke to Walther, checking the Kommando rosters for the day. He took the sheaf of papers and went into the yard and started the jeep motor. He sat in the canvas seat, foot pressing the accelerator, waiting for the motor to stop sputtering.

He shifted the gear and drove from the area into the company street. The military policeman waved him through the gate and the jeep was on the highway.

What's number one on the itinerary today, Ben thought, old circuit rider?

You know, he said, the Solina lumber mill. As usual. Check the prisoners working there. See Anne, be grateful, cut it clean, and wrap it up. It was nice and it's done. Put a polish on it and give it back.

And it's true. You are grateful. It's necessary to be a

man once in a while to be sure. You didn't do much; just sat back and let her make a man of you.

Do the prisoners doubt themselves? How do they reassure themselves? You know. Everybody knows.

They reassure themselves.

He swung the vehicle from the paved highway into the rutted dirt path. Sudden in the country quiet came the thin scream of hooked metal clawing into a tree. He drove into the sandy clearing, and parked before the Solina Lumber Company sign. The wood scream died and the rotor blade burred quietly and shut off.

Ben walked by the stalls of sliced planks. Germans worked busily, piling logs and lumber, looking up to wave. He climbed the shuddering steps to the loft and went into the office.

Three desks were in the room, crowded by filing cabinets. Anne worked, alone in the office, a flexible tube lamp shining on her typewriter. She struck the keys quickly, not looking up.

"Hello, Anne," he said, smiling.

She lifted her head, shaking her hair back from her face. She stared at him coldly.

"Only women are immoral," she said. "Men are just human."

"What?" Ben said.

"My mother was angry," she said, "when she found out who I went out with."

"Your mother doesn't know me," Ben said.

"She says I know plenty of nice boys."

"What am I?" Ben said. "Nasty?"

Anne fingered the filigreed chain circling her neck. "No," she said.

"Doesn't your mother like soldiers?"

"It's not that." She lifted the chain, showing a silver cross. Folding her hands in her lap, she smiled at Ben.

Oh, Ben thought. I'm being exorcised. Shall I pale and reel back, foul Beelzebub? Or maybe Lucifer. I can't pronounce Beelzebub. This is it. Hoffman's a stranger. "Anne," he said. "You've been kind to me. You're sweet and sensitive. You're important to me. But if you're sorry we've gotten close to each other, I'll leave. We'll forget we ever dated." Good, he thought, clean and noble.

"Ben," she said earnestly, "I'm glad we dated."

Ben thought. Why the cross? He reached across the desk, lifted the cross lightly and dropped it back into her bodice. "I understand," he said.

"I like you," she said.

"I like *you,*" Ben said.

"I more than like you," she said, insistently.

"I more than like *you,*" Ben said, obediently.

"Oh," she said.

"Well," Ben said. "Wherever we go, whatever we do in life, we'll remember we've known each other. We're part of each other now. You're part of me; I'm part of you." That's a little thick, he thought, but this kid's dramatic. Exit line.

"Yes, Ben," she said. "That's why I'm glad. I really love you. I admire you. You understand me so well. Always."

One date, Ben thought, is always? This is too metaphysical for me. "I'll be grateful all my life," he said.

"Ben," she said softly.

He walked swiftly to the door. *Not all over again,* he thought. He paused at the door. "If things were only different . . ." he said, closed the door behind him, and descended the stairs, two steps at a time.

He checked the roster with the German Kommando leader, drank a cup of coffee from the five-gallon can, gave the prisoner the empty cup, and drove away.

That's a puzzle, he thought. You never know where you'll find it. She invents drama. She never laid me last night; she laid a Jew. Alien, exotic Hoffman.

He shifted into neutral and waited until traffic was clear and drove from the rutted dirt onto the hard black highway.

Prejudice again. What kind of minds do they have? How do they think?

Superior Hoffman. You think you're not prejudiced? Would you have laid Anne last night if she were Jewish?

Maybe you're prejudiced against Jews?

Hold up, man, that's rough! Why *haven't* I ever laid a Jewish girl? Maybe because I come from a small town, where the only Jewish women I knew as a child were my mother and my aunts. Maybe I think laying a Jewish woman would be incest. Ha, why not? I'm supposed to want to sleep with my mother.

Admit it. That's the only way to beat it. Everybody is prejudiced. I am. Recognize it. You lie if you deny it. The only way to fight prejudice is to admit it and discount it. Acts are truth. Admit it.

He slowed for the military police booth at the gate and turned left on the company street.

Me prejudiced? My God, yes. When did I ever deny it? I'm the only true democrat: I'm prejudiced against everybody.

I think I'm everybody. That's my trouble. I can't hate anybody. And if that's true, I can't love anybody.

You lie, Ben. You're doing it again. You're ashamed of yourself because you pity that little self-deluding Anne, and every time you pity you wonder who the hell you think you are to tower Olympian and lean over to pity another human being.

You think you understand. You deceive yourself. Accept the fact you're another human being. Hate them. Love them.

You're not God.

You're a human being.

For a backwater little farm girl, she's sure inventive.

He hit the foot brake and the tires locked and skidded on the cinders. He climbed from the jeep, took the Manila folder and went into the orderly room.

"Ben!" the company clerk said. "Do me a favor. The dental clinic wants a roster of our men right away. Nobody's around to take it over."

"Sure," Ben said. "Hand it here."

He put the folder on the desk. The company clerk pulled the sheet from the typewriter, folded it, and gave it to him. "Thanks, Ben," he said.

Ben backed the jeep from the barrier, drove four blocks to the dental clinic. He left the motor running and went into the low brick building.

A white-smocked dentist met him.

"Here you are, sir," Ben said. "A roster of the enlisted personnel at the PW camp."

"Good," the dentist said. "Open your mouth."

"What!" Ben said. "I'm only a messenger."

The man in white grinned. "Your name's on this paper, isn't it?"

"I guess so."

"Sit down and open your mouth." He peered into Ben's

open mouth, tapping and picking. "A cavity," he said. "May be impacted. Dangerous."

Ben swallowed. "Doctor, I've got a pathological fear of dentists."

"Everybody does," the officer said. "Look, with luck, you'll soon be discharged. And your teeth have to be fixed first. Trot along to Oral Surgery and make an appointment."

Dazed, Ben walked along the corridor. He entered a door with a frosted pane blackly inscribed ORAL SURGERY.

An officer in a high-buttoned white jacket said, "Your name?"

"Ben Hoffman, sir."

"You were here before, weren't you?"

"Yes, but I never came back. I'm scared."

"Well, you sit down and I'll take care of you right now before you run away again."

"No," Ben said. "I'm busy, doctor. I—I have to go to the Quartermaster detail right now. I left the motor running."

The officer laughed. "All right," he said. "Come back Monday at three. An extraction."

"Thank you, sir." Ben walked swiftly from the office through the corridor into the open air. He jumped into the jeep and drove away.

Coward, he thought. Oh, my liberal parents. Sending me to the novelty in town, the woman dentist. She hated children, she hated me, and she had only one drill, a needle point she held to the tooth until it came out smoking on the other side. My parents had no prejudice and they sent me to that woman week after week. Court-martial me, he thought, I won't be there Monday.

He parked and went into the orderly room.

"Delivered," he said.

"Thanks, Ben," the company clerk said. "You had a phone call. I told her to call in a few minutes."

"Who was it?"

"I don't know. She'll call soon."

Ben took the Manila folder and went through the captain's office into the mess hall around the screen into his office. He threw the folder on the desk and sighed.

"Ben!" The clerk's voice was thin and distant. "Phone!"

Ben walked back, sat at the desk, stared at the telephone and shook his head. He lifted the receiver from the desk.

"Sergeant Ben Hoffman."

"Ben," the phone said. "I'm sorry, Ben. I didn't want to hurt you. I didn't realize how cruel I was. Forgive me, Ben."

"That's all right, honey," Ben said. He laughed. "You were just testing your claws."

"Won't you come around tonight? I do want to show you I'm sorry."

Ben exhaled. "No," he said. "I won't be around. It's not that you're cruel, it's just that you think about these things at all. Keep up the good fight, but leave me out of it." He hung the receiver on the hook.

He leaned back. Well, he thought. You're a sport. You throw pretty, willing girls away like they grow on trees.

He rose. "Boy," he said to the clerk, "I'm tired."

"It's early in the day to be tired," the clerk said.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"SERGEANT HOFFMAN," Major Krugman said, sitting erect, belly pushing from the desk, "you are to report to the base hospital this morning to testify against Private Irving Kind."

"To the hospital?" Ben said. "Why a court-martial in a hospital, sir? Is it a special or a general, sir?"

"It's an inquiry, Sahj'nt," the major said, swinging toward the window in the chair. "That boy will have to learn."

"An inquiry?" Ben said. "What's an inquiry?"

The fat old man selected a pipe from a rack on the desk, zipped open a leather pouch and dipped the bowl into the tobacco, packing it steadily with his thumb. He struck a match and lit the pipe.

"Sahj'nt," he said. "Don't worry. Just report. 10:30 this morning, room 104, base hospital."

"All right," Ben said.

Through the closing door Ben heard the major say quietly, "Sahjn't." He opened the door and said, "Sir?"

"Come back in here, Sahj'nt."

The major shifted his stomach against the desk and leaned forward. He stared at Ben. "Sahj'nt," he said, "I know you're a troubled man. And I don't insist on all the military formalities. We got to work together in this world. I don't believe one man is better than another. But we got to have discipline, too. Now, this morning you're goin' to appear before a group of officers. You're goin' to represent this unit. You want us to be well represented, don't you?"

"Yes?" Ben said.

"Just for practice, now," the fat old man said, "I want you to salute me and take your leave as a good soldier should. You understand?"

"Oh yes, sir," Ben said. "Just for practice." He stiffened, swung one heel out and brought it into place loudly beside

the other, chopped the side of his hand at his brow and let the hand fall toward the major like a swung axe and land, fingers slightly cupped, by the trouser seam. He pivoted and walked out the open door.

"You should have waited for me to return the salute," the major said after him, "but that was good."

Ben went out the screen door of the orderly room and walked across the lawn to the barracks. He removed his fatigues and put on freshly pressed suntan shirt and pants. In the latrine mirror he inspected his face and decided not to shave. He went into the yard and sat in the jeep.

The first sergeant came from the supply room and stopped on the boardwalk. "Where you running off to now?" he said. "All dressed up like a regular soldier."

Ben leaned against the wheel and smiled. "Not a regular soldier, Sergeant. You got to practice twenty years to be a regular soldier."

"Well," the first sergeant said. "You're making sense."

"And that," Ben said, "is another thing which distinguishes me from a regular soldier, Sergeant."

"Six stripes you got," the first sergeant said, "You ought to be arrested for false pretenses."

"Hey, that's a good one," Ben said. "Those goddam six stripes must be plastered across my face. That's all you ever see when you look at me."

"I see more," the sergeant said darkly, "I see brown." He walked away on the slats.

"Yeh, and you see red, too," Ben said. He turned his wrist to see the watch. He started the jeep motor and drove slowly from the yard around the corner to the hospital and parked before the main entrance.

Room 104 was a waiting room. No one was there. Ben sat in a chair and read a magazine. At ten twenty-five the door opened and Irving walked into the room, smiling nervously. A large man strode in after him, white helmet liner on his head, white leggings wrapped around knife-creased trousers, a braided white cord looping from his belt to the handle of a holstered pistol.

"Ben!" Irving said. "Am I glad to see a friend!"

Ben rose and shook hands. The guard adjusted the M.P. band on his arm and sat down, reaching for a magazine. "Irving," Ben said. "How are you? How are they treating you?"

"The food stinks," Irving said. "Give me a cigarette, will you, Ben?"

Ben gave him the pack. "Can you send me a carton, Ben? We can't get them in the stockade."

"Sure," Ben said.

"If you ain't got the money, forget it," Irving said. "I wouldn't ask, but we're dyin'."

"Don't worry," Ben said. "I'll send you a couple cartons."

The guard coughed. "Do you mind," Ben said, "if I talk to Irving?"

"No," the guard said. "Irv ain't no trouble. Go ahead." The prisoner shook the pack toward the guard. "No," the big man said, smiling. "You want to get me in trouble? You know I can't smoke on duty."

Irving laughed. "My ass bleeds for you, Pat. Pat's an ex-combat man, Ben. He ain't chicken. How you makin' out with that fat bastard major?"

"All right," Ben said. "What's this, Irv? A trial or what?"

"Damned if I know," Irving said. "They don't tell me nothing. I don't care. I get more justice in the stockade than I do in the goddam outfit."

"You'll get justice," Ben said.

"I'll get what they give me," Irving said. "The goddam book."

"What the hell did you have to blow your top for?" Ben said. "You been in the Army longer than that."

"Aw, Ben, right's right. You know that. I ain't gonna sit still while they pile crap on me."

"Right's right, all right," Ben said. "The Army taught me a lesson. When I came in, I didn't believe what I saw. Men getting pushed around, punished for nothing. Well, I believe what I see now. Justice don't just happen; you got to work for it. You deserve what you let happen to you." Ben took a cigarette from the pack on the table and lit it. "Justice doesn't drift down from heaven."

"I work for it," Irving said. "I told him off, din' I?"

"Beating your head against a wall isn't working for justice. You got to figure. You got to have patience. And you got to be a little scared, too, and have some sense."

Irving stubbed his cigarette violently in the ash tray. "I'm scared," he said.

"I could have helped you."

"Ah, who the hell are you? You're sweatin' the goddam Army, too. They got you jumpin', too. They're lookin' to shaft you, Ben. You better watch out for yourself."

"Looking to shaft me," Ben said, "and shafting me are two separate things, Irv. That's what I'm trying to tell you. You let them shaft you when you blow your top."

The door to the adjoining room opened. A corporal said, "Sergeant Hoffman? Step in, please."

Seated behind a long table was a major with the crossed pistols of the military police on his collar. At his right sat a first lieutenant. To the left was seated a captain. On his collar was the emblem of twin snakes twisting on a winged staff.

The major returned Ben's salute.

The corporal thrust a Bible before Ben and said, "You swear that the evidence you shall give in the case now in hearing shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. So help you God."

Ben rested his hand on the Bible and said, "I do."

The major said, "At ease, soldier. Be seated." The corporal motioned Ben to a chair before the table. Ben sat.

"What is your name, rank, organization and station?"

"Ben Hoffman, Master Sergeant, Prisoner of War Detachment, Prisoner of War Unit, Fort Jackson, South Carolina. Detached Service, Cypress Army Air Base, Charleston, South Carolina."

The major leaned forward on the table and said nothing. Ben shifted in the chair.

"Sergeant," the major said, "are you ashamed of your outfit?"

What the hell are you talking about, Ben thought, *my* outfit. "Ashamed, sir?"

"I see no chevrons on your sleeve, no unit patch on your arm, and no insignia, Sergeant. Army regulations specify these be worn on all uniforms."

"Yes, sir," Ben said. "I'm not ashamed, sir."

"Why are you violating army law, Sergeant?"

"These khakis were just issued, sir. I had very little notice to appear, sir, and I changed uniforms quickly. I'm sorry."

"Those khakis are rather faded to be new issue, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir," Ben said.

"You should be an example to your men, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir," Ben said. My men, he thought, are two hundred and fifty German prisoners.

"Do you know the accused, Sergeant? If so, state his name."

"Yes, sir. Private Irving Kind, sir."

"Were you in front of Major Krugman's hut about 2:30 P.M. on April 19, 1946?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see the accused at that time?"

"Yes, sir."

"State what happened."

"Sir, Private Kind reported to Major Krugman that he had not had any time off duty for a long period."

"Was he insubordinate?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Did he refuse to go on duty that night?"

"He was rather excited and incoherent, sir."

"Did he refuse to go on duty that night?"

"As I remember, sir, he said he didn't believe it was fair to assign him to duty that night."

"Did he refuse to go on duty that night?"

"I do not remember his exact words, sir. I remember that he expressed anger at being assigned duty. I cannot recall specific words in which he refused duty, sir."

"Did he refer to Major Krugman as a 'fat-assed major'?"

"Yes, sir," Ben said.

"Did he say 'in a pig's ass' to the major?"

"I do not know that he was speaking to the major, sir. I think he was speaking to me."

"Are you accustomed to enlisted men addressing you in such terms, Sergeant?"

"He wasn't addressing me, sir. He was stating his opinion to me."

"Opinion about what, Sergeant?"

"I suggested that he was overwrought and would apologize when he calmed down."

"Apologize to whom and for what?"

"To the major, sir, for the terms in which he expressed his indignation."

"What terms, Sergeant?"

Ben lifted in the seat and pulled the chair firmly under him. "He used words like hell and damn, sir."

"And 'fat-assed major'?"

"And 'fat-assed major,' sir," Ben said.

"All right, Sergeant. The corporal will have a statement of your testimony for you to sign."

The captain with the caduceus leaned forward. "Sergeant, you said that Private Kind was incoherent. Would you explain that?"

"Yes, sir. He was indignant and he would start sentences without finishing them. He would choke up and begin new sentences. He couldn't find satisfactory words to express himself."

"Thank you, Sergeant."

"That's true of him under all circumstances," Ben said. "He can't put his thoughts into words and he feels inferior because of it."

"Confine your answers to the questions asked you," the major said.

"Sir, may I ask a question?"

"Very well, Sergeant."

"Is this a court-martial, sir?"

"This is an inquiry."

"May I make a statement, sir?"

"If it is relevant."

"Sir, Major Krugman is new to our detachment or he would never have preferred charges against Private Kind. Irving is classified psychoneurotic. It is on his Form twenty. With a little sympathy, he does his work well. He cannot be held accountable for these outbursts."

The captain wrote on a pad before him.

"According to his record," Ben said, "Irving is to handle no firearms. He is holding a job as armed guard against the contrary recommendation on his card. He deserves company punishment at the most. The stockade will be another proof to him that he is being persecuted. He needs help, not punishment."

The major said, "What access do you have to his record, Sergeant?"

"I am acting first sergeant of the detachment when the first sergeant is on pass or furlough, sir. Irving Kind is a good worker, sir. Army regimen is difficult for him to understand. He has been recommended for discharge by previous commanders for emotional instability."

"The accused has adequate representation in this court,

Sergeant Hoffman," the major said. "That will be all, thank you."

Ben rose and saluted. The medical captain smiled at him. "The statement will be brought to you in the waiting room," the major said. Ben pivoted and left the room.

The guard slouched comfortably in the chair, reading a magazine. Irving sat upright on a straight-backed chair, staring blankly before him. On the table was the pack of cigarettes.

Ben lit a cigarette and said, "They won't do much, Irv. I think one of the men on the board is a psychiatrist."

Irving stared at the door. "No, they won't do much. Who the hell you kiddin'? I've done time before. I don't care what they hit me with. I can take time. They ain't scarin' me."

"I told them," Ben said, "that you aren't supposed to even be drawing duty as a guard. It's on your record that you're too emotional to get regular duty."

"What you tell 'em. I'm nuts?"

"No. Just that you're nervous. It's on your record."

"You told 'em I'm nuts."

"All right. So I told them you're nuts. What's the difference as long as you beat it? The whole thing's crazy. What's the difference?"

"I can do time. I ain't afraid of time."

"Well, anyhow I did my best," Ben said. He sat in the next chair. "I think you'll get a medical discharge out of this. I told them that it didn't do any good to punish you. They know that. You're too nervous to take this crap. I told them you should be discharged and sent home."

"Discharged?" Irving stared at Ben.

Ben smiled. "Wouldn't that be a break?"

Irving swept an ash tray off the table, clattering to the floor. The guard sat erect. Irving jumped up. "You bastard!" he shouted. "Why don't you mind your own business!"

The guard said, "Sit down. What the hell ails you?"

Irving strode to the window. He stood, looking through the glass, his jaw flexing, lips clamped together. Ben picked the ash tray from the floor and stubbed the cigarette. The guard looked at him inquiringly. Ben shrugged.

"Home," Irving said.

Ben said, "You hate the Army. You bitch all the time. Don't you want a discharge?"

"Big shot," Irving said. "You can't mind your own business."

"Mind my own business," Ben said. "What's my own business?"

"Where am I goin'," the prisoner said. "Home? I don't need no help from you to go home." He turned from the window. Tears ran down his cheeks. "Big shot."

"What the hell," Ben said.

"I'll eat my discharge, huh?" Irving choked.

"I thought you hated the Army," Ben said.

"I love the goddam Army!" Irving shouted. "I never asked the goddam Army for no goddam favors nor you either!"

"What the hell you talking about?" Ben said.

"What am I going to eat?" the prisoner shouted. He came to Ben's chair and yelled in his face. "My discharge?"

Ben put his hand against Irving's chest and pushed him away. "I'm sorry, Irving," Ben said. "I'm honest to God sorry."

"You son of a bitch," Irving said. "Why don't you mind your own business?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"WOULD you send me such an address?" Walther said.

Ben sat at the desk, pencil resting on the name in the prisoner punishment book. Günstig would return to the compound today. A blond kid convinced I belong to an evil race. For him, thinking differently is being a traitor. He's honest. And he's wrong. Ben chuckled. How he would have loved to be a martyr! I didn't use a club. I didn't report him. A German male Joan of Arc. What do you do? Don't give me trouble, Günstig.

He's wrong. Do you hate people for being wrong? You do. He's honest. Do you hate people for being honest? You don't. What's right? The truth. What's the truth?

"Ben," Walther said.

If he gives me any trouble, I'll make him orderly for the guard detachment. Put him around the men all day. Let him find out the way these men think. Let him try to convince Raffia and Tennyson and Manny of *anything*. Let him try to pound a polished concept into my tatterdemalion friends who don't like anything: capitalists, Communists, Nazis, Fascists, the Army or each other. Günstig, how would you like to meet some independent, unrelated minds?

"What address, Walther?" Ben said.

"Finally," Walther said. "Were you asleep that you were so rude?"

Ben bobbed his head stiffly. *"Verzeihung,* Walther. I am sorry. I was thinking about Günstig who emerges today from confinement into the blessed freedom of the barbed wire."

"Na, was dumm ist!" Walther said. "It is for us to be bitter, not you, Ben."

"Fair trade," Ben said. "You do my work, and I suffer your bitterness."

Walther shoved the card table back from his legs. "It is like the short story you told me once. A person died. The

church's bells were ringing, and one man was asking the others, 'For whom do the bells ring?' And they said, 'They are ringing for thee!' It was one part of the body of the humanity that died, it was me and you."

"You believe that?" Ben said.

"Certainly!"

"What address do you want, Walther?"

"You know, the address of an American girl to write to me when I return to Germany."

Ben laughed. "What's wrong with the girls in Germany?"

"Nothing. They are nice girls. But I want to know a girl in America who thinks this open and free way. I know what the girls in Germany think like."

"Do they all think alike?"

"No, that is not what I want to say." Walther turned in the chair. "You know that is not what I want to say. It is that an American girl would surprise me and tell me things to inform me. You give me the address of a real job, Ben."

"A real job? All right, Walther. I'll try. And you give me the address of a real German job, all right?"

"Agreed, Ben."

"Agreed."

The company clerk appeared at the edge of the screen. "Ben," he said, "some captain from the medical corps just called. He wants some information about the prisoners. I told him to see you."

"What's he want to know, Corporal?"

"I don't know. He said he'll be over in a while." The clerk disappeared.

Walther pulled the table close and leaned on his elbows, folding his hands. "Ben," he said, "I think that I want to be a liberal, like you."

"Liberal," Ben said. "I never told you I was a liberal."

"But, Ben. That is the way you think."

"I do not think like a liberal," Ben said. "I think like Ben Hoffman."

"Always you play tricks with words," Walther said. "You *are* a liberal."

"I know too many liberals," Ben said, "who cry about people they can't help, and are cruel to people they can help."

"You talk about the dignity of humanity," Walther said. "You are not selfish. You are a liberal."

"I am selfish. I am not liberal. And I talk about *my* dignity. I believe human beings are sacred. But I am entrusted with only one human being. Me. My duty is to fulfill and take care of myself."

"Um Gotteswillen!" Walther said. "You confuse me. Again you talk like the Nazi!"

"I don't act like one, Walther," Ben said. "For all of any man's talk he can do good in only a limited area. I do my best with people I meet. I don't feel guilt about anything else. Not about Negroes, starving Indians, or even Jews stacked in Nazi furnaces. I worry only about the way I treat my family, my friends, my acquaintances, my prisoners. I'm not liberal and I'm not Nazi."

"Don't you want me to be liberal?"

"Liberal is a word," Ben said. "I want you to do right. Good comes from acts. Don't worry about words. If your acts are good, your words are good. If your acts are bad, your words are bad."

"If I did not put Jews in the ovens, I am not bad?"

"If you watched, you are bad. If you knew, you are bad."

"Ben, we believed Jews were bad. We knew they were being punished."

"A man is bad because he did something, not because he is Jew or German. A man is bad because of an act, not because of a word."

" 'Bad' is a word."

Ben said nothing. He stared at the desk. "That's the trap," he said slowly. "Bad is a word, and for each person it means something different. It is a trap. We must recognize the trap. That's the only degree of escape from the trap."

"When I am free," Walther smiled, "I will remember not to be a liberal."

"Just be a good man," Ben said.

"I will," Walther said. "When I am free."

"Now," Ben said. "No man is ever free of other men." He pulled a drawer, lifted out the inlaid cedar chest and placed it on the desk. He removed the lid and gestured toward Walther. The German leaned over and took a cigarette. He snapped a lighter and held the flame to Ben's cigarette and his own.

"Strange," Walther said. "The cedar taste in the cigarette smoke."

"I like it," Ben said. "Smells like a walk in the woods."

"In the autumn," Walther said.

"That's right," Ben said.

"Yo, Ben!" The voice floated distant over the screen. "An officer here to see you!"

"Be right there!" Ben shouted. He stubbed the cigarette. "Walther," he said hurriedly, "you can put an ideal perfectly into words and only imperfectly into acts. An ideal and an act are two separate things. If you think an ideal and an act can ever be one, you create a monster, a crime against nature. Nazis, Walther. Communists. Words can only guard an act, they can never be one!"

"Go to the officer, Ben." Walther smiled. "I understood you the first time."

Ben rose. "Sometimes words are acts." He pulled his tie tight.

The German slapped the card table, wobbling the legs. He laughed loudly. "Ben!" he said. "Poor Ben! Now I know who is confused!"

Ben paused at the edge of the screen. "Sure," he said composedly. "Everybody."

Standing by a desk in the orderly room, a tall spare man, lean face darkly shadowed, waited. His uniform hung limply. "Sergeant Hoffman?" he said. "I'm Jacob Heilmittel." He extended his hand. "I'm a doctor. I hope you can help me. I'm interested in trench foot and allied disorders. I understand you have many frostbite victims among your prisoners."

Ben shook hands. "Glad to meet you, Captain," he said. "Some of the prisoners are veterans of the Russian front. What do you want to know?"

The officer held out a thin-fingered hand. "Data," he said. "Pictures. A statement from each victim giving conditions under which he was frostbitten, symptoms and treatment. And a photograph of the afflicted members."

"That's quite a job," Ben said.

"This is not official, Sergeant." The man rubbed his shadowed face. "Understand. I am asking this as a favor. I've investigated frostbite and trench foot many years."

"Glad to help you," Ben said. "Let's go into the compound and talk to the German camp leader."

The officer lifted a musette bag from the chair and slung it to his shoulder. "Shall I offer to pay them?"

"For what?" Ben said.

Waiting at the gate for the sergeant to unwrap the chain, Ben looked curiously at his heels sinking slightly into the black road top. Heat rose wavering from the asphalt. The gate swung back. Ben led the officer onto a slatted walk by a wooden building. He knocked on a door marked with a large red cross.

"Herein," a voice shouted.

Inside, a tall man sat at a table spread with a great linen sheet. Cardboard cutouts were pinned to the cloth. *"Guten Tag,* Herr Hoffman," the tall man said. "Pardon me for a moment." He scrubbed carefully at the stencil with a stubby paint-stained shaving brush. Laying the brush on the lid of a coffee can, he rose.

"Who is that for?" Ben said.

"For *der* Manny," the towering German said. "He wants to give his lady friend a hand-painted table cloth."

"Another carton of cigarettes?"

"Ja," the German said. "Did your mother like the cloth you sent?"

"Very much," Ben said. "Captain, this is the German medical corpsman. First-aid man for the compound. Sani, this is Captain Heilmittel."

The officer smiled at the German.

"Sani," Ben said. "Look over your records and make a list of all men who have lost joints of fingers or toes due to exposure. Give the list to Befehl today."

"Gesagt, getan," the medic said. "I will do it immediately."

"O.K., Sani. Thanks."

Outside in the clearing a furry ball streaked across the ground from under the prisoner mess hall and leaped at Ben's knees, yapping shrilly. Ben picked up the puppy, holding his face away from the pink licking tongue. "This is Mutti, Captain. The happiest being alive. Every man in this camp loves this animal like a baby."

The lean-faced officer rubbed the puppy's ears. "Healthy-looking," he said. Ben put the puppy down, facing the row of prisoner huts, and slapped his rump gently. The little dog ran off.

"German medical men," the officer said, "must have valuable information on the effect of cold on the body. They

experimented on prisoners of every age, sinking them in ice water."

"I read about that," Ben said. "Measuring the time it took them to die."

"I hope we find that information," the officer said.

"Doctor," Ben said, his face drawing tight. "Here are some prisoners for you. Go ahead. Experiment."

The officer stopped and looked at Ben. "Sergeant," he said. "You're Jewish, aren't you?"

"Yes," Ben said.

"I am, too," the captain said. "What would you do with the research the Germans recorded on those tortured prisoners—tear it up?"

"No," Ben said.

"I'm a doctor," the officer said. "Nothing justifies taking human life. If that information will save human life, I want it. I'm every bit as Jewish as those prisoners in the ice-water vats were."

"I know," Ben said.

"That information is a fact," the doctor said. "It was gotten by beasts. But the information exists."

"I know," Ben said. "It should be used."

"All I want from your prisoners," the captain said, "is case histories. They lost fingers and toes in Russia in the snow. I didn't send them there."

"Captain," Ben said. "I'm Jewish. I don't know how to get rid of the horror I feel. You reminded me. I'm sorry."

"Sergeant," the captain said, "I owe you an apology, too. Forget it."

"O.K., Captain," Ben said. "Let's get on with our work for humanity."

The officer laughed. "I never put it that way, Sergeant."

Ben laughed and held open the door to the prisoner orderly room.

The prisoner clerk rose from the desk, running his hand through his clipped blond hair. "Herr Hoffman," he said. "Welcome. Befehl is in his hut. Shall I call him?"

Ben pulled up a chair. "Sit down, Captain." He turned to the prisoner clerk and said in German, "Nachtigall, put your hands on the table."

The blond clerk placed his hands flat on the desk and looked at Ben. The captain shifted to the edge of the chair. The thumbs were whole and perfect. The first joint was gone

from each finger. The hands were nearly square, tipped by skin wrinkled over points of bone. "The siege of Stalingrad," Ben said. "He told me he broke them off himself and never lost a day's duty in line."

The captain rose and studied the hands.

"Nachtigall," Ben said, "the officer is a doctor. Tell him about your fingers. I'm going to find Befehl." He turned to the captain. "I'll be back soon. This man will tell you his history."

"I don't speak German," the officer said.

Ben said from the door, "Nachtigall speaks English." He jumped from the stoop to the ground and walked toward the row of huts.

The hut was dark, the wooden flaps lowered for shade. Befehl lay on his bunk, hands behind his head, the long billed *Afrika Korps* cap tilted across his eyes. He breathed heavily.

"Hey," Ben said.

"Geh weg," the German said, unmoving.

"Oh Lord," Ben said. "Life in a prison camp. The pigs get fatter and lazier."

Befehl lifted the cap slowly and peered from under. He sat up and blinked. "Hello, Ben," he said. "The day is hot." He blinked and yawned. "May I offer you a bunk?" He pointed at the three beds ranged around the room. "Your choice."

Ben sat on a neatly made bunk. "To an African veteran this should be cool."

"Africa was not like this," Befehl said. "The clothes did not cling to the body."

"I know," Ben said. "The phrase in English: 'it's not the heat, it's the humidity.' "

Befehl rose, pushing his shirt into his pants. "I am at your service, Herr Hoffman."

"Good," Ben said. "There's a medical officer in your office now. He's studying the effects of cold on men. He wants each man who lost parts of the body to exposure to write a history of his case: where he was, how it affected him, how he was treated. He also wants a picture of the hand or foot. I told Sani to make a list of the men. You get the history of each man and have them all typed."

"In German?" Befehl said.

"Yes," Ben said. "Walther and I will type up translations.

And I want you to have all those men ready in formation for me at two tomorrow afternon. I'll take them over to Post Identification Section for photographs."

Befehl rubbed his eyes. "Ben," he said, "I'll have to take some off the Kommando rosters."

"No," Ben said. "We'll take the ones on detail over the following morning. At ten. Right?"

"Gewiss," the German said. "I'll have the reports for you tomorrow morning. Do you want me to go now to meet the officer?"

"Go back to sleep," Ben said. He rose.

"At your command, Herr Hoffman," the German said, lying down. He shifted the cap across his eyes. *"Auf Wiedersehen."*

"Bis später," Ben said, and opened the screen door.

In the office, Captain Heilmittel stood, watching the German clerk type, striking the keys rapidly with wrinkled finger stubs.

"You ready, Captain?" Ben said.

"Certainly, Sergeant." The officer shrugged the bag on his shoulder and followed Ben to the gate. "Nasty case," he said. "Those bones have no flesh flap over them."

"He makes out well," Ben said. "The first time I saw them, I gave him sympathy and he laughed at me. He's glad he's alive. He's got stories about bodies frozen to rock, and ground too hard to dig graves. They tucked their friends in the snow and left them for the Russians. He says he was a clerk and was in a shelter most of the time."

The sergeant swung open the gate and they stood in the road. "I'll send the stuff to you at the hospital," Ben said. "Early part of next week."

"Can I do something for you?" the captain said.

"No," Ben said. "I hope it helps you."

"It will," the captain said. He shook hands. "Sergeant, I appreciate your promptness and care. It's a pleasure to find such efficiency and willingness."

"It's nothing to me," Ben said. "You're doing the work."

The officer hitched his musette bag. "Sergeant, if you have an opportunity some day, look me up in Chicago."

Ben laughed. "I might have to. It gets pretty cold in Chicago."

He saluted the officer and watched him walk down the company street.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BEN opened his eyes and found the sheet over his face. He lowered the linen and stared at the company clerk.

"What do you want?" Ben said.

"Boy, you been threshing and flailing in that bed," the clerk said. "You been dreaming?"

"I don't dream," Ben said.

"The captain just called," the clerk said. "He's back from leave and he said he's coming in this morning."

"What time is it?"

"Ten in the morning."

"Did the major go?"

"He left early this morning. Tennyson is driving him to Fort Jackson in the command car. The major said to tell you good-by and good luck."

Ben swung his feet over the side of the bunk and sat up. "Thanks," he said.

"I thought you'd want to be up when the captain got here."

Ben opened the footlocker, picked up his glass eye and his toilet kit. "I appreciate it, Corporal."

He walked in his shorts to the latrine, washed and dressed, went to the kitchen and ate breakfast. Walther was in the office, transcribing figures from the daily Kommando rosters to the monthly work report. Ben sorted the contracts and listed work hours per month for each contractor.

"Ben," Walther said, "do not forget that this afternoon the man and wife from Indianapolis come to visit her brother in the compound. You made the appointment for two o'clock today."

"That's right," Ben said. "I'll stay to sit in."

"The lady said she hadn't seen her brother for sixteen years. Since she left Germany for America."

"That's Johann Verwalter, isn't it?"

"Yes," Walther said. "He has been taken off the work detail today and he waits in the compound. He is very excited."

"I should imagine," Ben said. "Sixteen years."

"You should imagine what?" Walther said.

"An idiom," Ben said. " 'I should imagine' means that I can guess how a man feels when he is about to see a sister he hasn't seen for sixteen years."

"I should imagine," Walther said wonderingly.

A knock sounded from the screen. The captain stood at the entrance, smiling.

"Captain!" Ben said. "Welcome back."

The officer stretched his hand across the desk. "Glad to be back, Hoffman. How did everything go?"

"All right," Ben said. "How's your wife!"

"She was kind of sorry to leave all her old friends. She's lonely here. Misses the Midwest. Misses her friends." The captain pulled up a straight-backed chair and sat. "What's this trouble I hear about?"

"Trouble?" Ben said.

"There's a notice in my mail," the captain said. "Irving Kind was court-martialed."

"Yeh," Ben said. "You should have briefed the major before you left. Irving called him fat-assed and the major took umbrage. He was in high dudgeon, as a matter of fact."

"Fat-assed," the captain said. "Fairly accurate."

"What did Irving get?"

"Three months in stockade and forfeiture of three-quarters of his pay."

"That's what he wanted," Ben said. "He wants respect. He thinks there are two strikes on him because he's Jewish. You should have told the major to stay in town."

"I suppose so," the captain said. "We getting a replacement?"

"No replacement," Ben said.

The captain took a cigarette from the cedar chest. "You're Jewish, Hoffman. Do you feel Jews have two strikes on them?"

"Some ways."

"You're pretty cocky," the captain said, "for a man with two strikes on him."

Ben put a cigarette in his mouth. Walther rose and lit

the captain's and Ben's cigarettes, clicking the lighter shut noisily.

"How do you adjust to the fact—the plain fact," Ben said, "that Jews are shoveled into furnaces?"

"How do you?" the captain said.

"You think things. People hate Jews. Either people are crazy, or Jews deserve to be hated. That's what I used to think. Neither is true. People hate each other. The reason Jews get it all the time is that they are: one, accessible; two, defenseless. Irv keeps swinging all the time. The more he swings, the more helpless he is."

"What do you do?"

Ben laughed. "I'm helpless, too," he said. "I just don't make myself accessible. I live on a mountain."

"Nice of you to visit us common people some of the time."

"Hell, Captain," Ben said. "I haven't told you the whole truth. I like being Jewish. I don't want anybody stoking a furnace with me, but I like being Jewish. Nazis, now, kill Jews to purge their own Nazi souls. Murder's a kind of despairing love for Jews. Unpleasantly expressed, I admit."

"Hoffman," the captain said, "you're nuts."

"I know," Ben said. "I'm really coon-shouting today. But I'm sincere. A Jew is as native to everybody as a bad conscience. Being Jewish is like being everybody, only more so."

The captain shook ashes into the tray. "Hoffman, I admit Jews are smart."

"That advantage a Jew loses the moment you forget he's a Jew, Captain."

"In that case, Hoffman, I'll forget you're Jewish."

"Don't," Ben said. "You might have to do your own work."

The captain shook his head and rose to his feet. "I spoke to the major on the phone this morning," he said. "He spoke highly of you. I don't think he's anti-Semitic."

Ben laughed. "Captain, that old man doesn't know Irving's Jewish. He just doesn't like being called fat-assed."

"I'm leaving," the captain said. "Stop in and have a drink when you're in town." He walked around the screen, his footsteps sounding across the mess hall.

Walther sat back in his chair. "Ben," he said. "In my army you could go to prison for years for talking to an officer like that."

"In this army you could, too," Ben said. "If he raised his voice, I'd be the meekest soldier around. He knows it."

As he worked Ben felt his undershirt grow heavy with moisture. Walther finished the monthly report for Fort Jackson. He spread the sheet on the desk before Ben and read aloud the numbers from the daily rosters for Ben to check.

"*Bestimmt*," Ben said. "They check."

"Now add the numbers," Walther said, "and confirm the sums."

"What's the use?" Ben said. "You add better than I do."

"I cannot deny that that is true," Walther said. "But I can make a mistake and for that you will be responsible. It is logical that we prevent each other from error."

"No," Ben said. "I trust you."

"I do not trust myself," Walther said. "I make a mistake and the captain will be blamed. He will blame you and you will blame me." He slapped the sheet. "Add!"

"All right," Ben said. The figures were correct.

After lunch he inspected the day room. The German orderly had swept and dusted and scrubbed. The afternoon sun burned. Ben opened the windows. On the back wall were tacked huge posters of skin-covered skeletons found at Belsen and Auschwitz *Konzentrationslager* and emaciated British prisoners of Göttingen *Gefangenenlager*. He pulled out the tacks and folded the papers, laying them on a shelf by the magazine rack.

He went to the kitchen. Otto, the cook, mixed grape drink and poured it into two pitchers full of ice cubes. He put the pitchers and three clean glasses on a tray and Ben carried the tray to the day room and arranged them on a table. He pulled three chairs to the table.

He went to the barracks and disconnected an electric fan, wrapping the cord around the base. He closed the door behind him and descended the stoop, fingers hooked in the wire cage. He stood still on the boardwalk.

Down the middle of the company street shambled two prisoners in stained khakis. Behind them marched a thin little man, an Air Corps staff sergeant, clean and shining, trousers knife-creased. He held in his hand a heavy revolver, shifting warily from prisoner to prisoner.

"Mercy," Ben said.

The little man halted the Germans before the gate shack.

Never taking his eyes from the two men, he called for the guard.

Raffia stumbled from the shack. His eyes widened in his stubbled face.

"Where's the officer in charge?" the sergeant snapped, holding the automatic steady.

"Whatsamatter?" Raffia said. "Them Jerries kill somebody?"

"Call the officer!"

Raffia rubbed his face and looked toward the orderly room. He saw Ben. "Here's somethin'," Raffia said. "Maybe he'll do."

"What's wrong?" Ben said, placing the fan on the ground.

"Who are you?" the sergeant said.

"Majordomo of the compound," Ben said.

"Major, sir," the sergeant said. "We found—"

"I'm a noncom, Sergeant," Ben said. "You see gold leaves on my shoulder?"

The soldier shifted his eyes quickly to Ben and back to the Germans.

"No," he said.

"I'm a master sergeant," Ben said. "I'm in charge of the compound. What's wrong?"

The Germans stared at the ground. "The lieutenant and I," the Air Corps soldier said, "saw a truck parked near the dump area. We investigated and found these two Germans in the back of the garbage truck fooling around with each other."

"Hoo!" Raffia said. "Hold that gun on 'em, Sergeant!"

"Well," Ben said. "We must be vigilant."

"That's sodomy," the little sergeant said importantly. "That's a federal offense."

"Is that right?" Ben said.

A German raised his head and tried a brief smile. His face was dirty and tragic.

"Well!" the sergeant said. "What are you going to do?"

"Give them a license," Ben said. "Wish them happiness."

"Are you going to lock these prisoners up or not?"

"All right," Ben said. "Tell your lieutenant to send over his statement and your statement of what you gentlemen witnessed, notarized by your commanding officer. We'll send the men to Fort Jackson for trial. Lock them up, Raffia."

Raffia took the keys from his pocket. "Come on, fellas," he said. The Germans followed him around the corner of the mess hall. The sergeant holstered the revolver.

"Convey my thanks to the lieutenant for an excellent piece of work," Ben said. "And my congratulations to you, Sergeant."

The Sergeant locked the holster flap. "You got a peculiar attitude," he said.

"I'm as shocked as you are," Ben said.

"What will they do with them?"

"None of your damn business," Ben said, smiling. He turned and walked to the barracks stoop, picked the fan from the ground, and went to the day room. He set the fan on the window sill, plugged the cord into a socket. The blades turned sluggishly, speeded, and, turning the cage slowly from side to side, sent dust motes swirling. He looked at his wrist. 2:05. He went outside and stood by the gate shack, smoking a cigarette and squinting in the brilliant sun.

A jeep came slowly around the corner and stopped. A buxom middle-aged woman in a wrinkled linen suit and a thin older man sat primly and stiffly on the tiny rear seat. The heavy-set driver wore an M.P. armband. He idled the motor. "Ben," he said. "These folks have a letter from you. I was going off duty and thought I'd drop them off."

Ben helped the woman climb awkwardly from the jeep. "Mr. and Mrs. Bauer?" She smoothed the dress over her broad hips and smiled timidly. "Yes," she said.

Mr. Bauer reached into his hip pocket. "How much?" he said to the driver.

"No charge, friend," the burly M.P. said. "Glad to do it." He raced the motor and the jeep leaped away, tires squealing.

Ben called into the gate shack. "Raffia, call the compound and tell them to send Verwalter over to our day room right away."

Raffia's voice came muffled from the hut. "O.K., Ben. Verwalter."

In the day room, Ben switched on the light and pulled out chairs at the table for the guests. "Please have a seat," he said. "There's a cold drink on the table. Help yourself."

Mrs. Bauer sat down, sighing. "Oh, my, this is nice. How is Johann? I'm so anxious. Is he well? Does he make out good with you? Is the work hard?"

Ben smiled. "He is a good worker, Mrs. Bauer, and makes

out very well." He spoke to the man. "You folks make yourselves at home. You have all afternoon and no one will disturb you here. Designated military personnel must monitor these visits between German soldiers and American relatives, so I will have to stay here with you. I'll read a magazine and you forget me."

The door opened and a black-haired, florid man stepped inside, blinking from the sun. He pulled khaki trousers up over a paunch and peered around the room.

"Over here, Verwalter," Ben said.

The prisoner ran to the table. The buxom woman struggled to her feet. "Johann!" she said. "Johann, Johann!"

The prisoner looked at her. "Elli!" He opened his arms and hugged her. "Sister!" he said. Tears were on his face. The woman kissed him wildly and laid her cheek against his. She strained him to her bosom.

The thin man in the black suit stood, shifting his feet, smiling uncertainly.

The prisoner reached behind him and unfastened his sister's arms. He shook hands formally with his brother-in-law. "Ernst," he said. "I am glad to see you."

Mr. Bauer covered the clasped hands with his free hand. "I, too," he said. "I am glad to see you, Johann."

The family sat at the table. Mrs. Bauer shifted her chair bumpily to the side of her brother.

Ben turned the fan toward the group. He sat in the corner of the room, turning the pages of a magazine. The murmur of German was lively in the room. He leaned back and closed his eyes, trying not to hear the sighs and outcries. German words floated. *Hilda? Wem hat sie geheirate?* The prisoner lowered his voice and Ben heard the woman sob, *"Tod? Tod? In Russland?"*

Ben drowsed, thinking vaguely. Anne. Nothing to throw away. Warm and eager. Kind of exciting. Turning that down was too dramatic. An evening with her away from camp. Maybe her father has a car she can borrow. She's good to talk to, too. And complaisant. That's a good word for her. Complaisant. What a grandstand play I pulled. Don't worry. She'll call again. It was just the right play. Have patience. Outlast her. She'll call. I promise you. Don't call her. Anyhow, you can meet her by accident when you inspect the Kommando. Look at her with all that trembling restraint you're too shy to put into words. Ha.

He slept and German ebbed around him and he woke and slept again. He brought his arm up and looked at his watch. 4:30.

Would you marry something like that?

You crazy?

Virginia, he thought. That graceful redhead. No tricks. Really worried about pain and people. She's still surprised by the world. She hates people hurting each other. A man could teach her love. It would take a man. I could do it.

Anne knows what she's doing. Whatever she needs, it's not me.

"No!" Ben heard. He opened his eyes.

The German prisoner was standing by the table. "No!" he said. "I saw no atrocities in Germany. Nothing resembling atrocities. And I have visited Dachau!"

The woman said something in a low voice.

"No, not with Poles either," Verwalter said. "Poles worked for me in my factory. I was the manager of a textile mill and we worked Poles. But what the Poles did to Germans!"—He lifted his hands high—"I myself saw! Women, German women, raped; even little girls, babies. Tortured! I saw! I spoke to survivors."

The woman touched the table. *"Schrecklich,"* she said. *"Fantastisch."*

"After we took Poland, we treated them well. The Poles who worked for me were free; they lived in barracks; they were given work. They were not allowed to associate with Germans, for their own protection, of course. The only thing was, they had to wear a P. Naturally, they had to be punished when they stole. They are born thieves; no matter how well we searched them at the factory, they stole."

The black-suited man struck a match on his shoe and lit a cigarette. He looked across the room at Ben.

"Slavs!" the prisoner said. "Brutes! Murderers! Hundreds of thousands of Poles fled to us to escape the Russians. I asked one Pole why he came to the Germans instead of the Russians. He said"—The prisoner rolled his eyes and a tremor shook his body—"that Pole said, 'How, how can you compare the Germans with *Russians!*' " The prisoner slumped, looked at the floor, lifted his hands eloquently. "What can one say?"

Ben rose and walked to the back of the room. He unfolded

the poster, spread it across the wall, and hammered in the tacks with an empty soda bottle.

The room was silent.

Ben stood back and regarded the grimaces of the scattered corpses, bone frames bulging the skin. Hollow-eyed survivors stared stupidly over great bone noses in shrunken faces. Thin-lipped mouths hung, exposing the teeth.

Mrs. Bauer called, "Those are not Americans!"

Ben leaned forward and read the print. "No," he said. "Russians, Poles and Dutch."

"I can't understand," she said. "I couldn't hurt a fly." She stared at the poster. "But Russians and Poles have done such things to Germans." She wiped her brow with a tiny handkerchief.

"That makes it right for Germans," Ben said.

"The Poles *are* dirty people," she said. "Horribly stupid and filthy."

"Poor people often are," Ben said. "Poles and their children here in America are good citizens."

"Oh, that's right," the buxom woman said. "America is wonderful!"

"Yes," Ben said. "You both came from Europe, my parents came from Europe. Here everyone has the opportunity to improve."

"Oh, yes," she said. "What part of Germany do your folks come from?"

"Not Germany," Ben said. "Russia."

Ben pulled out the tacks, folded the poster, and sat in the chair in the corner. The black-suited man smiled at him, and the brother and sister talked quietly.

Later, Ben rose. "It's almost six o'clock. Your brother will have to return to the compound."

The brother and sister kissed good-by. The prisoner shook hands with his brother-in-law.

Ben drove the middle-aged man and woman to the base entrance.

"Do you have a car?" Ben said. "I can drive you to town."

"Our car is parked here," the man said. He shook hands with Ben. "Thank you very much for your kindness and hospitality."

"You're welcome," Ben said. "Will you stay in town?"

"No. We must leave today."

Mrs. Bauer opened her reticule. She took a wallet and pulled out a five-dollar bill.

"I'm so grateful," she said. "Please take this. I want you to have it."

"No," Ben said.

"Can I send you a present, if you are not allowed to take money?" she said. The man put a hand on her arm.

Ben smiled. "No, Mrs. Bauer. I hope you enjoyed your visit with your brother. Good-by, Mr. and Mrs. Bauer. I wish you a good trip home."

Ben turned the jeep around in the road and drove to the company area, parked, went into the kitchen, and made a cold beef sandwich. A pitcher of iced tea was in the refrigerator.

He ate and went to the barracks. Men were scattered in the long room, dressing for town, sprawled on bunks playing poker, reading newspapers. He stopped at Manny's bunk. "No date tonight, Manny?"

The fat soldier smiled peacefully and pulled at the pillow under his head. "No," he said. "I thought I'd give my honey a rest tonight. You got a date?"

"No," Ben said. "I don't."

"Want to take Billie Jo out?"

"Boy, you got confidence," Ben said. "Aren't you afraid to let her compare you and me?"

"Ben," Manny said lazily, "I got charm I ain't even used yet. You're a good man, but I ain't feared of man nor beast. Not with women, anyhow."

Ben laughed and lay on his bunk, crossing his hands under his head. He turned on his side. "Manny," he said. "You aren't peddling Billie Jo's—address, are you?"

"No," Manny said. "I thought maybe she'd be lonely tonight, Ben. I'm on guard." He switched on the tiny radio above his head. The speaker moaned and suddenly squalled into hillbilly song.

"Jerks," Manny said. He turned the switch.

"Leave it on," Ben said. "I like it. It's Elizabethan music, preserved pure to our day." He lay on the bunk, the plaintive wails climbing in the air. He lay limply, body relaxed. In his neck a muscle jerked, pulling his jaw down. Ben clenched his teeth. The muscle jerked.

I'm not nervous, Ben thought. But the muscle jerks. I'm calm and the muscle jerks. I've got to consult that damn

muscle to find out whether or not I'm nervous. I don't know. The muscle knows.

He closed his eyes. The radio announced the station and introduced a troupe of gospel singers. A piano rattled loosely and a quartet of voices sang, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord. . . ."

Ben stared blankly at the ceiling. Even He didn't deny Himself indignation. He took a whip and scourged.

The screen door slammed. Tennyson stamped in, his face streaked with sweat and dirt. A musette bag was slung over his shoulder. "Hey," he said. "That's a hell of a drive." He saw Ben and sat on the edge of the bunk. "I've got some prisoner mail, Ben," he said. "Shall I put it in your office?"

"That's a fat bag," Ben said.

"Yeah," Tennyson said. "They told me these are answers from those cards the boys sent back notifyin' their people."

Ben looked at the bag. Full of thanksgiving letters from parents and wives and children. The first contact in years.

"Shall I put it in your office?"

"What time is it?"

"Eight-thirty," Tennyson said.

"Leave it here," Ben said.

A footlocker lid slapped shut. Starcek, the supply sergeant, locked his chest and rose. A pair of trousers, speckled with cardboard tags, hung over his arm. He ambled toward the door, passing Tennyson and Ben.

"Yak shmai," Starcek said.

"Dobra," Ben said.

Tennyson watched the sergeant go out the door. "What language is that?" he said.

"I don't know," Ben said. "Yugoslav. Croat. Serb. Maybe Polish."

"I swear to goodness," Tennyson said. "Where do you learn all that talk?"

"You told me," Ben said. "I got 'em in my genes."

"I wish I had a few of them things myself," Tennyson said. "I'd like to talk that stuff."

Ben lifted the flap of the musette bag. Inside were bundles of cards. He slipped out a card. An edge was ragged. Search card answers. Under the heading MESSAGE FROM NEXT OF KIN (IN BLOCKLETTERS—NOT OVER 25 WORDS) was printed in a trembling hand: *"Gott sei dank, mein Sohn. Ich . . ."* Ben slid the card into the pack and closed the bag. He

hooked his feet into his rubber shower clogs and rose, hanging the musette strap on his shoulder.

"See you later," he said to Tennyson.

"Where you going?"

"Get rid of these," Ben said. He went out the screen door, walked the slats to the gate hut. Inside, the gate sergeant read a magazine, squinting in the thin light of the overhead bulb. Ben cranked the field telephone.

"Befehl hier," the receiver said.

"Befehl," Ben said. "Mail just came in. Answers to the search cards."

"Ben!" Befehl said. "For me was there—?"

"I don't know," Ben said. "Whistle the men out and we'll give them the cards."

"Sofort!" Befehl said. The wire clicked dead.

The gate sergeant unlocked the gate. Whistles shrilled. Men ran from huts, clutching trouser waists, in pajamas, in khaki shorts. Ben walked to the center of the clearing, men dodging about him, muttering, rubbing their eyes. They ran, bumping into other men, stood in line, filled gaps in the ranks.

"Achtung!" Ben shouted. "Forget the formation. Stay quiet! Mail is here. When I call your name, take your card."

In the tower-lit clearing, the men stopped. The Germans moved quietly, slowly toward Ben. He opened the bag, pulled out a pack, threw the rubber band on the ground, and held a card high to read the name in searchlight glare.

He called name after name. Hands reached out to take the cards. After each name, he heard expelled breath and new silence.

He flipped the cards quickly.

"Neumann!"

A hand. *"Danke."*

"Urleid!"

"Thanks, Ben."

The last name was called. The Germans moved out of the lighted clearing into the hut rows, reading, lips moving. Scattered prisoners stood watching Ben.

"No more," Ben said. "That's all."

Befehl held a card in his hand. Sweat gleamed on his face. "Herr Hoffman," he said. "It was good of you to bring these to us now."

"All right," Ben said. "I hope it is good news." He walked

to the gate. A prisoner touched his arm. "Herr Hoffman," he said, low-voiced. "I did not get the search card yet. Would you be so kind—?"

Ben held a hand over his eyes against the tower glare. He peered at the man. "König?" he said. "König, I sent a card over for you long ago. Befehl has it. Go get it from him now. Probably slipped his mind."

"Thank you, Herr Hoffman," König said. He turned and shouted across the clearing. *"Befehl! Bitte! Moment!"*

"I'll send it off tomorrow morning," Ben said. The German ran heavily across the cindered area.

Ben rattled the gate and the sergeant came from the hut, pulling at his key ring.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE pitiless harsh light cracked through the sleeping barracks. A guard was pounding on a wooden footlocker, one hand still on the light switch.

"Everybody up! Trouble in the compound!"

The barrack filled with sound swelling and clattering as the wooden nightstick rose and fell again and again on the wooden drum. Ben sat upright, his head pounding in the battering waves of ceaseless rolling drumming. *"For God's sake, stop it!"* he shouted. The nightstick stopped, but the drumming echoed in his head.

He sat on the edge of the bunk, his face cupped in his hands. He turned his forearm, bringing the wrist watch before his eyes. Squinting, he blinked rapidly. Three-thirty.

Cursing and yawning men were pulling on trousers and grasping clubs which hung by thongs from bedposts. Ben buttoned his pants, shoved on his slippers, and ran through the doorway down the walk to the wire fence. Hastily dressed guards milled before the gate. Inside, under the floodlights, prisoners were spilling from the huts into the clearing. The gate sergeant unlocked the swinging wire barrier and said to Ben, "We heard a scream and the tower guards reported men rushing to the third hut in row four. The whole damn place is wild now!"

Ben said, "Let the guards in and lock the gate. You guys stay inside by the gate."

Prisoners stood in groups, shouting and waving at each other in the bright glare of the tower lights. Men rushed from group to group, meeting shrugging shoulders and shaking heads. Fat Befehl rushed across the clearing toward the prison first-aid station. The big blond German medical corpsman strode across the white-lighted clearing after him, a limp body in his arms. Cries burst from the Germans. A brilliant flare shot through the clearing into a dark row between

the huts. The sergeant was playing the beam of the portable magnesium spotlight through the gate. Wagnerian drums pulsed in Ben's head. He looked up at the corner tower. He couldn't see guard or tower shack behind the glaring circle. A voice floated down, "Hey, Ben, what's wrong?" Ben shook his head.

The camp leader held the screen door open for the medic and his burden. He saw Ben, slammed the door behind them, and ran toward him, his florid cheeks pasty-white in the flooding light.

His clerk ran behind him.

"Herr Hoffman, Herr Hoffman," Befehl cried, "he screamed three times, *er ist fertig mit den Nerven!*"

"Who was it?" Ben said. "Who screamed?"

"Grenze. Richard Grenze, *Gefreiter*. He is completely broken! His nerves are collapsed!"

"Befehl!" Ben said. "Get the men back into their huts. Tell them what happened and get them back into their huts. I'll be in the first-aid room. Be there in five minutes."

"Jawohl, Herr Hoffman!" Befehl ran to the center of the clearing, his clerk after him. Ben waved the guards out of the enclosure. He heard Befehl shouting as he entered the first-aid room.

The German lay on a canvas cot. The blond medic knelt beside him, supporting his head on an arm. He held an open bottle of rubbing alcohol before the unconscious man's nose. The bottle moved slowly from side to side. The patient muttered excitedly and lifted a hand to push the pungent odor from his face. He did not open his eyes.

"Was ist los, Sani?" Ben said.

The medic rubbed his palm against his undershirt. It was marked PP, protected personnel, under Geneva Convention regulations. "Herr Hoffman," he said, "pour some alcohol on my fingers." Ben obeyed. Sani stroked the patient's temples with a wet hand.

"Was ist los?" Ben repeated.

The blond giant slapped the patient's wrists. "He woke suddenly from his sleep. He screamed and threw chairs about. He broke a table and tore the pictures from the walls. He kept screaming until he fainted."

Ben stood beside the cot and looked down at the prisoner. The medic gently lowered the man's head on a pillow. Grenze lay flat, breathing quickly. "What should be done,

Sani?" Ben said. The *Sanitäter* rose to his feet and towered above Ben. "He needs rest. He should go to the hospital."

"An emergency?" Ben said.

"No."

The patient opened his eyes. "Herr Hoffman," he said weakly. Tears wet his face. He scowled and shut his eyes tightly.

"What's wrong, Grenze?" Ben said. The prisoner's lips drew taut. Ben pulled up a stool and sat down. He felt Grenze's hands. Ice-cold. Brow feverish. Pulse irregular. "This is nervous collapse, isn't it, Sani?" The medic nodded.

"Grenze, want a cigarette?" The prisoner opened his eyes. Ben put a cigarette between the German's lips and lit it. He offered the medic one.

"*Danke,*" said the medic.

Befehl rushed in, the clerk behind him. Befehl turned and snapped, "Go to bed!" The clerk left.

The German on the cot took the cigarette from his mouth. Befehl said, "Herr Hoffman, it is nervous collapse—nothing else! We have no Nazi trouble here!"

"I didn't say it was anything else," Ben said irritably. The patient smiled wanly.

Ben knew Grenze's history. He had bent an old metal curtain rod to hang a covered light over his bunk to light his chemistry books in the late night. He studied during lunch hour and while in the latrine; he sat on the grass by the soccer field, studying, oblivious of the shouts of the players. Ben remembered admiring the calm detachment with which the German had told him of his mother and father and sister, killed in a bombing attack on Stuttgart. Ben looked at Grenze.

Grenze was sitting up now, leaning on a naked pillow against the wall. He lifted the pillow higher to rest his head. "Thank you, Herr Hoffman," he said, "for the cigarette."

"You feel better?"

"Yes. I am ashamed to give such trouble."

"Studying too hard?"

The German hesitated. "Perhaps. But I do not understand the weakness. It will not happen again. My studies are progressing well and I will be ready for the test when I return. My land will have need of intellectuals."

"Oh, my God." Ben turned to the *Sanitäter*. "Give him a sedative." Intellectuals. *Wir Intellektuelle.* He'll go crazy

for real when he finds out the world doesn't exist for superman. Who is the Nazi? The man who cannot exist in a world where men are equals because to be equal is to be inferior. Ben grinned to himself. He's sure equal now, an equal prisoner. And if his dream does not collapse, then Grenze *must* collapse. Which is all right with me.

We intellectuals.

"Sani, he looks better, doesn't he?"

"Yes."

"Give him that sedative, then, and we'll see in the morning."

Ben closed the screen door quietly behind him. The night air lay quiet and cool. He breathed deeply, standing on the steps, savoring the silence. Incidents, he thought, like feather after feather drifting down on a counterbalance scale, until presto!—the axis tilts and registers the weight. And one more feather upsets the equilibrium. Poor Grenze. There but for the grace of God go I. And, despite the grace of God, there goes Grenze.

Ben's slippers shuffled loosely on the boardwalk. Light fell from the wire-netted window of a hut. He looked in idly, and called, "König, did you get the search card to fill out?"

The German came to the door in faded shorts. "Oh, Herr Hoffman. *Ja, danke.* Will you take it now?"

König turned back to the table and brought the card to Ben, closing the door softly behind him. Holding the card before the light of the window, Ben checked the entries with his finger. He turned the card over and read the capital heading aloud, softly.

"The old world is gone, eh, König?"

The German stared at Ben and at the card. He turned his face away and smiled into the distant searchlight of a tower. "The old world is gone."

He re-entered his hut, pausing at the screen door to say, "Good night, Herr Hoffman." Ben buttoned his collar against the night air and stepped from the planks to the damp earth.

Tower lights flooded cold and brilliant the deserted clearing. Frogs in the far marsh croaked clear and harsh. Seated in the center of the lighted empty clearing was the little pup, gazing disconsolately now at the black shadowed mess hall, now at the lighted gate shack through the crossed timbers of

the wire gate. He saw Ben, wagged his haunches, trotted over to Ben's feet. "Hello, Mutti," Ben said and took the wriggling puppy in his arms. Stroking him through the tangles of fur, Ben walked across the empty clearing toward the gate. He bent his head and said, "Woof!" into Mutti's ear. The puppy shook his head, long ears slapping his muzzle, and barked sharply.

Ben nodded understandingly. "You see, they're right, Mutti," he said to the dog, ruffling and scratching the shaggy ears. "I can speak anything."

The sergeant strode importantly across the road, heavy holster jouncing at his side, and fitted the key into the padlock. He unwound the chain from the post and swung the wire gate open.

Ben walked out of the compound across the road into the shack. The sergeant swung the gate shut, wrapped the chain around the posts, and snapped the padlock.

Ben put the puppy carefully on the floor of the gate shack and waited for the sergeant to enter.

"Keep Mutti company until morning," he told the sergeant.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BEN parked the jeep on the shoulder of the road. He leaped down the embankment and stood in the field. Soft rain had fallen, freshening the air, and the sky was cool and gray. Prisoners worked in the crumbled, turned earth of the furrows, squatting in the rows, picking beans from the vines. Far in the distance, screened by trees, was the plantation house. I hope Virginia is home, Ben thought. He walked the path along the field, the smell of wet earth rising.

Over the field lay silence. Along each vine a man worked alone, plucking the scattered pods left from the first gleaning. Ben stood, watching. He breathed deeply, the spongy soil yielding under him. *Ruhe,* he thought. Peace.

"I am in danger, Herr Hoffman." The whisper hovered in the air.

A German, kneeling in a nearby row, his head bent, reached deep into the leafy vine.

Ben walked and stood above him. "What?" he said.

The German did not lift his head. "Men in the camp want to kill me," he whispered, "Because I said I was glad the Wehrmacht did not resist in Neuwied and force the Americans to destroy the city."

"So?" Ben said.

"They say that I wanted Germany to lose the war. That I should be hanged."

"Yes?" Ben said.

"My mother and father live in Neuwied," the German said. Bean pods rattled into the basket.

"Stand up," Ben said. "Strike a match for my cigarette."

The German rose, wiped his hands on his shirt, took a book of matches from his pocket, and held a flame for Ben.

"They say that since Germany has lost the war, every respectable German should kill himself."

"Thanks," Ben said. He took the cigarette from his mouth.

"That Germany would lose the war was evident to me from a long time," the prisoner said.

"What are their names?" Ben said. He offered the cigarettes to the German.

"Thank you," the German said, striking another match. "There are many of them. I do not want to make trouble. I want only to be transferred."

"You don't want to make trouble," Ben said, "don't tell me about it."

"Herr Hoffman," the prisoner said, rubbing his forehead, "I am not weary of life. These others, the weary-of-life ones, want to drag all Germans down with them. Here, as in Germany, the guilty want to drag down the innocent."

"Innocent," Ben said. "Maybe it is the innocent who do the evil."

"Pardon, Herr Hoffman?"

"The guilty are those who watch the act and know it evil."

"I mean the Germans," the prisoner said. "The Nazis."

"I know," Ben said.

"Herr Hoffman, I ask only that I be transferred."

"What are their names?" Ben said.

"Please, Herr Hoffman," the prisoner said.

"All right," Ben said. "No names."

The prisoner rolled the cigarette in his hand, watching the smoke. "It is beautiful in the fields, Herr Hoffman." He stared at the cigarette. "I was a farmer. I do not like politics."

"I don't, either," Ben said. "You like to watch things grow?"

"I had a tractor," the German said. "The land was good land."

"You a good farmer?"

The German held smoke in his lungs. He let it drift from his nose, lazily float in the air. "If I had a farm so large as this," he said, watching Ben from the side of his eye, "I would get twice the yield."

"How?"

"The fields are carelessly picked," the German said. "Vegetables and grain are left to rot in the field."

"That makes the field richer next year," Ben said.

"A waste," the German said. "Chemicals feed the land better. The land is better controlled."

"We get as much as we need," Ben said.

"Better to get more than less," the German said soberly. "It is a crime to waste food the land can be made to produce."

"And you can do it better?" Ben said.

The prisoner turned and looked earnestly at Ben. "I can." He threw the cigarette into a furrow and kicked loose soil over it.

"You probably could," Ben said.

"I like farming." The prisoner smiled.

"The land is no slave," Ben said.

The German laughed. "Man is a slave to the land. That is the way of nature and it is good."

Ben knelt and dug a handful of dirt. "Here," he said, spilling the soil into the German's hand. "You need each other." He slapped dirt from his hands. "Put a list of those who threatened you in your footlocker. I want to know who to punish after they hang you."

"Is there no protection, Herr Hoffman?"

"You are a man," Ben said. "I cannot protect you. I can only help you to protect yourself."

"I want only a transfer!"

"I cannot be brave for you," Ben said. "You are not a baby. There will always be men who make sport with a frightened man." Ben scrambled up the bank and swung into the driver's seat of the jeep.

The prisoner stood, looking up at the vehicle on the road above. He bent and picked up the bushel basket.

"Soldier," Ben called. "You lied. You are tired of this camp and you want to leave."

The prisoner put down the basket. "Certainly I'm tired of this camp," he said. "But I did not lie."

Ben laughed. "Don't worry," he said. "You will soon be a free man on German soil. Men are leaving every day from the base camp. I am making up lists now according to the zone in which you live."

The German came to the foot of the bank. His face shone. "Is that true, Herr Hoffman?"

Ben turned the key and started the motor. He shouted above the noise. *"Mensch, es ist die Wahrheit!* The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

He drove along the country road toward the Laird house. Prison, he thought. Prison is for the guilty—to keep the guilty from acting. Decency is my prison. I don't want to escape.

I know I am guilty. They don't.

Innocence means guilt. Everything is paradox. Lie is truth. Keep it up, Ben, and they'll strap you in a jacket.

Lie or truth, it's life. Who has to justify life? Life exists before choice is possible. A man can choose only how to live. That's his limitation.

I like limitations, Ben thought. I like recognizing a wall and setting my back against the wall and examining everything inside the wall. I like being a man and not an idea. I like feeling that whatever I set into motion will bounce against the far wall and come back to me.

He turned into the wooded lane and parked before the porch of the plantation house. He sat, unmoving, in the jeep. I'm tired, he thought. Looking toward the shaded windows, he rubbed his temples. Is Virginia home?

A dog barked behind the barn. Ben leaned against the wheel and stared at the house. What are you starting now, Ben? What does Virginia have? You don't know. Will she be another "We shouldn't mean so much to each other, Ben—you're Jewish and I'm . . ."

Ben laughed. Anticipate, he thought. Get it started. Each act a new problem. You're just going to ask her to go to the movies.

A bee gesundt. As long as you're healthy. The old ghetto Jew's answer. The only evil is despair. The only sin is getting tired.

Ben climbed from the jeep and walked up the steps. Leaning against the porch railing, he scraped his shoes against the blade bolted to the floor. A curtain parted in a side window. Ben looked up, smiled, and waved.

THE END

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WHERE WOMEN ARE TABOO

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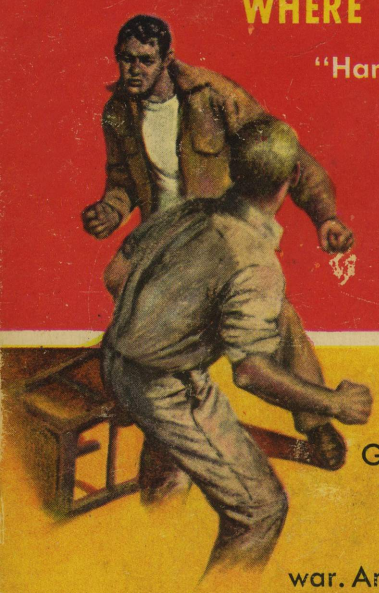
THE NATION



Guarding tough German prisoners was Sergeant Ben Hoffman's Army job after the war. And since women were taboo at the lonely Carolina camp, Ben and his soldier friends had almost as rough a time as their captives.

For their only diversions were on-the-base brawls and off-limits parties with WAC's. And even "nice" local girls like Anne could bring trouble to men who let themselves grow too restless ...

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